Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America
Author: Michael O. Emerson & Christian Smith
Publisher: Oxford University Press, 2000

Reviewer: Natasha Sistrunk Robinson

Why I picked up this book:

I wanted to have a better understanding concerning the polarized positions of race relations in the church. Additionally, this book was recommended as required reading for those interested in racial reconciliation and ministry in a multi-ethnic church context.

Who Should Read Divided by Faith:

I highly recommend this read for any Christian who are interested in these issues. In a post-Trayvon Martin and post-Ferguson cultural setting, this book is a necessary read for Christian pastors and leaders who want to become culturally competent.

What’s in Store for You:

“This book examines the role of white evangelism in black-white relations.” The authors are both sociologists, and the premise of their research is that well-meaning white evangelicals often desire to end racial division and inequality, while at the same time perpetuating the racial division and inequalities they adamantly oppose.

The book first calls the reader to confront the black-white racial divide. The authors present a framework for racialization that “(1) are increasingly covert, (2) are embedded in normal operations of institutions, (3) avoid direct racial terminology, and (4) are invisible to most Whites.” It understands that racism is not mere individual, overt prejudice or the free-floating irrational drive of race problems, but the collective misuse of power that results in diminished life opportunities for some racial groups.”

The authors continue their teaching lesson by taking a historical look at race and race relations in America and how evangelical racial thought has between shaped and practiced over the past 300 plus years. In addition to the historical narrative, the authors highlight critical advancements in the church through ministry and organizations like Promise Keepers and the personal examples of leaders like John Perkins, Tom Skinner, and Samuel Hines who launched the reconciliation movement. According to these foundational leaders, racial reconciliation is achieved through four major steps: 1. Individuals of different races must develop primary relationships with each other. 2. Together they must recognize social structures of inequality and resist them together, 3. Whites must repent of their personal, historical and social sins, and 4. Blacks must be willing to forgive when whites ask them, while committing to repent of their own anger and hatred against whites.

The book continues by exploring solutions, both top-down (structural) and bottom-up (individual or grassroots) approaches to the race problem. At the top of the list of proposed solutions by
Christianity Today is getting to know people of other races, and particularly integrating congregations. These proposed solutions are restrained, however, when white evangelicals only see “one dimension of the problem” (individual accountability and responsibility) or fail to acknowledge that changing the current model of living will require different cultural tools and could indeed be quite costly. In summary, the authors’ research findings reveal that: “the cultural tools of white evangelicals led them to minimize the race problem and racial inequality, and thus propose limited solutions. All these help reproduce racialization.”

There is hope. “Religion has tremendous potential for mitigating racial division and inequality. Most religions teach love, respect, and equality of all peoples.” We normally spend most time with the people in which we share affinity, including a religious connection. Additionally, the authors’ research reveal that we all have group loyalty or “different ways of experiencing positive and negative behavior based on the ingroup/outgroup dichotomy.” We, therefore, need more diverse people in “our” ingroup if we are “to reach the destination of equality, interdependence, and mutual understanding.” For this to occur, we need a “more serious reflection on race-relations issues, in dialog with educated others…Good intentions are not enough. But educated, sacrificial, realistic efforts made in faith across racial lines can help us together move toward a more just, equitable, and peaceful society.” We can all get smarter and be more humble about asking questions and listening well.

**My personal take-aways?**

This book has been a pertinent history lesson for me and has helped me better understand why it feels like the conversations about race and racism sometimes falls on deaf ears in the church. Perhaps the greatest take-away has been a better understanding of how and why white evangelicals are more prone to offer individual solutions or judgment for the race problem without seeing or confronting systemic structures that are unjust and unequal. According to the authors’ research, white evangelicals often view the race problem in three ways, “(1) prejudiced individuals, resulting in bad relationships and sin, (2) other groups—usually African Americans—trying to make race problems a group issue when there is nothing more than individual problems, and (3) a fabrication of the self-interested—again often African Americans, but also the media, the government, or liberals.”

The theological conviction of freewill-individualism and the “miracle motif” (which is theologically rooted in the “idea that as more individuals become Christians, social and personal problems will be solved automatically”) also presents a significant challenge for addressing race issues. “White evangelicals not only interpret race issues by using accountable freewill individualism and relationalism, but they often find structural explanations irrelevant or even wrongheaded.”

I am committed to living as a person of integrity and a credible witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which means that I am committed to the ministry work of reconciliation. If Christ has come to die for anything, it was for restoration and redemption (2 Cor. 5:17-21). Christ has restored our broken relationship with God and our broken relationships with other people. A gospel that promotes good doctrine and right thinking according to our own standards, yet does not wrestle with or challenge us to right actions or to confront our lack of love, grace, or
forgiveness in relationship to others is an incomplete gospel at best. I am committed to surrendering to God and allowing his to transform me into a courageous, suffering servant like my risen savior—the counter-cultural, break the status quo, reject the self-righteous and embrace the sinner—Jesus.

**Twitter-worthy:**

“…not having to know the details or extent of racialization is an advantage afforded to most white Americans.” #DividedbyFaith

“most white Americans honestly desire a color-blind society, and often oppose the color-conscious for that reason.” #DividedbyFaith

**Quotable: PERSPECTIVE**

“Because the United States is racialized, both historically and currently, race is a quintessential example of what Peter Blau calls a ‘consolidated characteristic.’ By this term he means that several characteristics—such as race, education, income, wealth, family backgrounds, and cultural practices—tend to vary together. According to empirical tests in U.S. metropolitan areas, race is the single most consolidated characteristic of all.”

**Video Resource:** *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* by Michael O. Emerson, Professor of Sociology at Rice University

© Natasha Sistrunk Robinson 2014