

Christian conservatism and race in the U.S. today: Crossing boundaries for Christ?

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abstract

What sensibilities and skills does contemporary, conservative Christianity offer for creating relationships across racial boundaries? Are these relationships anti-racist, multicultural, post-racist, or a combination of these? Exactly what if anything about conservative Christianity, in either white or African-American variants, may hinder these relationships? We propose to address these questions by going beyond official position statements, liturgies, or surveys of values. One of our main contributions is to understand relations between increasingly anti-racist or multiculturalist position statements by theologically conservative Christians and the very particular, sometimes surprising ways conservative Christians try to act on these statements in local communities and in church life. Our paper will sketch a larger context of U.S. conservative Christianity and racial attitudes among whites and African Americans. It then will observe selected, conservative Christian community and church projects that try to make racial boundaries permeable. We will identify particular cultural and institutional strategies that shape this boundary work. What aspects of conservative Christian theology, social organization, group style, worship experience or other factors become salient in these efforts? The paper will offer some tentative conclusions on patterns of relationship-building in these projects, how they do or don't create multiracial collectivities, or re-inscribe pre-existing boundaries. The paper's evidence base will include GSS and other survey data on race, religion and social distance; new ethnographic data on white evangelicals in community service projects that cross racial divides; and case studies of interracial churches and conservative Christian events or media with interracial audiences.