

**Bridging boundaries for Christ?
Conservative Christians and black-white relations in community life**

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Conservative Christians bridging boundaries: a summary

Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others have observed that 11:00am Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America. Much as many mid-nineteenth century abolitionists were evangelical Protestants, conservative Christian leaders and congregations frequently condoned and sometimes actively supported segregation and subordination of African Americans throughout the past three hundred years (Emerson and Smith 2000). Yet in organized and informal ways, theologically conservative white Christians in the past thirty-five years have tried to transcend this very checkered history of race relations. Witness the June 1995 statement on racial reconciliation issued by the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest theologically conservative Protestant denomination in the U.S.:

. . . Be it further resolved, that we apologize to all African-Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systematic racism in our lifetime; and we genuinely repent of racism of which we have been guilty, whether consciously (Psalm 19:13) or unconsciously (Leviticus 4:27); and be it further resolved, that we ask forgiveness from our African-American brothers and sisters, acknowledging that our own healing is at stake. . .”

These conservative Protestants evidently found legitimate and pressing motives for confronting racism, “individual and systematic,” in biblical teachings—the *sine qua non* of truth in evangelical Protestantism.

This paper asks how ordinary conservative Christians perceive black-white relationships, and how they try to initiate and sustain new black-white relationships, inside and beyond their churches. Many people wonder about the future of American community life, and in Tocqueville's spirit they often place their hopes in civic relationships, including relationships between religious groups that might bridge social inequalities and cultural differences. Whether or not those hopes are well-grounded empirically is a question that research is just now addressing (Lichterman 2005), but many visions of a healthy democracy would include a citizenry that can communicate and work together locally across social inequalities and differences some of the time.

To investigate race attitudes and relationship-building practices among black and white conservative Christians we perform original analysis on several bodies of evidence. First we use two national survey samples to investigate attitudes and opinions regarding race among white and African American conservative Christians, and whites and blacks in general. Then we consult qualitative case studies to explore intentional efforts of white conservative Christians to sustain relationships and collaborations with African Americans, in churches and community service groups. Introducing the term "race-bridging" to designate these relationship-building attempts, we explore the categories that white and black conservative Christians use to understand these relationships, then step back and identify tensions and frustrations they encounter in the course of applying those categories.

Others have traced the potentials and limits in conservative Christians' race-bridging attempts to theological orientations that shape these Christians' views of the social world (for instance, Emerson and Smith 2000). Without denying the theological contributions to race-

bridgers' social imaginations, this paper takes a different approach. We shift the inquiry from a focus on motivating belief systems or general worldviews to a focus on the ways conservative Christians perceive and try to construct relationships. We conceive these perceptions and practices regarding cross-race relationships in terms of symbolic boundaries.

Evidence here leads us to suggest that conservative white Christians draw more exclusive racial boundaries than whites in general, and in some ways are more symbolically exclusive of blacks than black conservative Christians are of whites. Close-up case studies of intentional race-bridging point toward the existence of a dominant "Christ-centered" strategy apparent in most of the cases, but also an alternative Christ-centered strategy that engages a different everyday politics of race. Survey and qualitative evidence together lead to a relatively pessimistic prognosis. Despite Christ-centered intentions, the dominant strategy of conservative Christian race-bridging seems unlikely to surmount racial boundaries that survey data suggest conservative Christian whites draw. Case studies portray conservative Christian whites sometimes drawing exclusive boundaries against African Americans without realizing it; their dominant race-bridging strategy does not give them the language to discuss these racial boundaries openly. Given the relative paucity of disciplined, close case studies, and the limits of our survey data described below, we stress that conclusions drawn here are tentative. Nevertheless we suggest that our boundaries framework holds much promise for illuminating the methods by which ordinary conservative Christians try to create cross-race relationships.

Parameters of the inquiry

Why conservative Christians?

To investigate Christian sources of legitimacy for inter-racial collaboration or anti-racist projects, mainline Protestantism might seem the more obvious choice. Northern, theologically liberal Protestant leaders supported the civil rights movement in the 1960s (for instance, Wuthnow 1988), and mainline Protestant denominations continue to support a variety of liberal causes such as environmentalism, civil rights, and socially responsible investment practices (Wuthnow and Evans 2002). To stay suitably compact, the paper limits its focus to Protestants, who still constitute the religious plurality in the U.S., but focuses on conservative Protestants and especially churches or individuals who identify themselves as “evangelical.”

Modern evangelical Protestants advocate an “engaged orthodoxy” that highlights personal piety and holds a personal relationship with Jesus Christ to be the driving force of all life’s endeavors not only within but beyond the circle of Christian believers.¹ Their religious identity emphasizes religious *certainty*. In contrast with many mainline Protestants, evangelicals usually think of their Christian identity as not only their most basic, life-defining one, but one that grows not from birth but from the moment that the individual explicitly states the intent to commit his life to Jesus Christ.² The “two-party” sketch of American Protestantism vastly simplifies distinctions between and within churches (Jacobsen and Trollinger 1998), but comparing mainline and evangelical, or theologically liberal and conservative Protestants in this way follows authoritative arguments about religious change since WWII.³ Fundamentalists, also theologically conservative Christians, often are defined as those Protestants whose orthodoxy leads them to put less emphasis on engaging with the unsaved world on a day-to-day basis and more on maintaining personal piety amidst other fundamentalist believers. The distinction between fundamentalists and evangelicals is not always easy to tease out of the available survey data consulted below, and when we do so, we do

not find large differences between them in attitudes or beliefs relevant to race. Neither do self-identified fundamentalists nor fundamentalist congregations appear in the close-up case studies we consult.

By any numbers, it makes good sense to ask how evangelical Protestants approach race: They are the largest family of Protestant denominations (Smith 1998; see Wuthnow and Evans 2002) in the U.S. today. And it may make sense to say that evangelical Protestantism is, as Martin Marty put it (1976), the “cultural majority” in the U.S. If evangelical Protestants have a distinctive approach to understanding or refashioning race relations in the U.S., this approach would likely represent a wide current in American civic culture. Evangelical Protestantism sprouted its own movement for racial reconciliation in the mid-1960s. Nurtured at first by three African American religious figures who were willing to identify themselves with the primarily white-associated term “evangelical” (Emerson and Smith 2000), the discourse of racial reconciliation remained a relatively small trend inside evangelical Protestantism until the late 1980s. Since then, a stream of books, magazine articles, study guides, inspirational speeches, and denominational public statements, including that of the Southern Baptists, have earned attention for this discourse of racial “healing” beyond evangelical church circles. Case examples in this paper include organizations or congregations explicitly identified with this racial reconciliation movement among evangelicals, and ones that pursue interracial relationships or collaboration in some way without articulating what they do in terms of reconciliation.

Why black-white relationships?

Modern evangelical racial reconciliation discourse began with a focus on relations between African Americans and whites. The focus has remained on black-white relationships as racial reconciliation has become represented increasingly by white spokespersons trying to reach out to blacks (Emerson and Smith 2000, especially p. 63). There are good reasons of course to ask what cultural resources evangelical Protestantism may offer those who want to construct new inter-racial projects and organizations beyond black-white relations. Evangelical and more broadly conservative Christianity in the U.S. is growing among Latinos (Greeley 1998; Hernandez 1999) and Korean-Americans (Ecklund 2006) and other East Asians too. All the same, there are good reasons to limit the inquiry.

First is a matter of keeping the comparisons workable. Many conservative Christians now identify as “evangelical” and historically, “evangelical” has been strongly if not entirely a white religious category. Protestant U.S. denominations developed along sharply segregated lines, such that scholars continue to speak of a “black church” separate from American Christian church life in general (for instance, Lincoln and Mamiya 1990), even if the formal theologies of black churches resemble those of some *de facto* white, conservative churches and denominations. This means the great bulk of founders and leading popularizers of modern evangelical Protestantism in the 1940s and after were, unremarkably, white (Smith 1998) and directed their ministries to whites as a matter of course. The relatively unmarked character of whiteness in the U.S. in contrast with minority racial designations (Roediger 1994, 1998), and all that implies about differential privilege as well as different textures of collective identity, certainly would complicate attempts to treat white evangelicals and Latino or Korean evangelicals as somehow comparable subjects of race relations discourse or race-bridging practice. To be a Latino

evangelical is to carry a very different configuration of group identities and prospects than to be a white evangelical.

Our review of close-up cases in the literature suggests that efforts on the part of whites to bridge racial gaps with African Americans may be the most common form of self-conscious interracial collaboration forged by evangelicals. These efforts would parallel the focus on black-white relations in prominent evangelical public statements. Some evangelical congregations or organizations include other racial groups; projects of inter-racial collaboration need not be seen as bi-racial only (for instance, Christerson et al 2005). Still it is telling that Emerson's work on multiracial churches (Emerson and Woo 2006; Christerson et al. 2005) characterized white and African American as well as mixed white-black congregations as "American churches," in contrast with other congregations that ostensibly draw on religious or other cultural traditions less central to the making of the current "American" religious culture. While we may question how much longer it will make sense to describe American religious culture in Christocentric and black-white hues (Wuthnow 2005), it does seem to make sense historically.

Finally, although the United States is increasingly multi-racial, the black/white divide has had a foundational and highly significant role in American history. Patterns of racial intermarriage remain lower for blacks than for any other group (Qian 1997), while patterns of residential segregation remain higher (Logan et al. 1996; Quillian 2002). Patterns of income inequality and disadvantage between whites and blacks continue to persist, even if these social structural boundaries between blacks and whites show some signs of weakening (for instance, Patterson 1997, p. 27; see also Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Conley 1999).

Symbolic boundaries between African-Americans and whites are strong yet somewhat permeable. The Black Power movement—and the civil rights movement more generally—has been successful in mobilizing African-Americans to demand equal rights and economic opportunities and to affirm and celebrate their cultural distinctiveness and collective identity. The Civil Rights movement also helped transform the meaning of blackness for whites, effectively contesting once dominant stereotypes about the innate inferiority of African-Americans, for instance, and making blatant racism normatively unacceptable in American society at large. It is possible, then, to change the ways Americans draw symbolic boundaries around racial identity, and it is important to see how conservative Christians attempt that change and with what results.

Drawing symbolic boundaries of Christianity and race

The conceptual framework of boundaries

The boundary framework concerns the social process by which groups are formed and acquire their properties in opposition to other groups.⁴ Boundaries result from the interaction between individual and collective actors who pursue strategies of self-definition in relation to other individuals and collectivities on their horizon of reference. Individuals and groups regularly define other individuals and groups as being “like us” or “not like us.” We call these social processes of definition “boundary work” (Gieryn 1983; Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molnar 2002), or “boundary-drawing.” Boundary work occurs at the micro-interactional level, at the meso level, where it may lead to the formation of social groups, and at the macro level, where boundaries might be institutionalized and thus structure the distribution of resources. Boundary

dynamics occur in environments that are constrained by other social processes at all these three levels, including by the outcomes of past processes of boundary making.

The boundary framework goes beyond sociologies that derive groups from shared characteristics of individuals or from the pre-defined categories that the researcher uses to make sense of the social world. The boundary framework is perhaps the most promising way out of what Rogers Brubaker has recently termed “groupism” in sociological thinking (Brubaker 2004), in which it is assumed that membership in a social category naturally leads to a shared outlook on the social world, to dense social networks among members of the category and solidarity vis-à-vis other categories. The boundary approach, by contrast, asks how groups are produced and reproduced through everyday practices of individuals. It asks how actors interpret their identities and social positions vis-à-vis others. It asks which markers of difference and commonality are used to define a boundary, what consequences such categorizations have for everyday social practice, with whom members of a group associate or discriminate against, whom they perceive as “like” and “unlike”, and who is treated as an illegitimate competitor for status, power, and wealth. Following in the footsteps of Max Weber, Fredrik Barth (1969), Richard Jenkins (1997) and others, the boundary approach defines groups as a matter of collective imagining and identity as well as of associational practices.

Boundaries display a twofold nature. On the one hand, they are defined by a symbolic aspect, which pertain to the realms of collective representations and discourse. We refer to these as *symbolic* boundaries. On the other hand, a boundary has consequences for the web of social relations and the distribution of resources, such as expressed in patterns of intermarriage, residential and labor market segregation, access to elite institutions, etc. (Lamont 1992). These

are *social* boundaries. We will make some tentative claims regarding the consequences of white conservative Christians' symbolic boundary-drawing for the social boundaries of race.

Studying racial and religious boundaries means investigating how people define themselves in relation to other groups they imagine as salient, rather than taking a person's or group's identity as self-evident or as the direct product of a group's belief system. Avoiding "groupism" in this way, Lamont studied how African-American and white workers each construct their own racial identities in relation to those of the other race; she discovered the varying criteria that whites and African-Americans use to judge worthy people, and located a variety of criteria within each group too (Lamont 1999). Edgell and colleagues (2006) used survey data to analyze one feature of Americans' boundary-drawing in the field of religion, showing that many Americans draw boundaries against "atheists," more than against nearly any other identifiable group. Lichterman (2005) showed different ways that Protestant community service groups draw boundaries on their imagined "social map" of community groups and institutions in their locale. This boundary-drawing affected the kinds of civic projects groups could pursue and their successes as well. A new and growing body of research is asking how people try to *alter* pre-existing symbolic boundaries of race, through "destigmatization strategies" (Lamont 2006), or anti-racist strategies that take different form in different societies (Lamont and Fleming 2005; Lamont, Morning and Mooney 2002), or the erosion of spatial boundaries through school desegregation (Carter 2007).

Race-bridging

For ease of reference, we will refer to the boundary-drawing strategies of interest to us as “race-bridging” strategies. This general term is intended to encompass a variety of intentional efforts at creating relationships or collectivities across race. The “bridging” term has become popular especially through the work of Robert Putnam. In Putnam’s work (2000), “bridging social capital” refers both to successful efforts at creating relationships across social distance and the capacity or social resources for these relationships.⁵ Bridging for us refers simply to interpersonal or inter-group efforts at relationship building whether or not these relationships succeed by the actors’ standards or by sociologists’ standards.

There are different styles of creating cross-race relationships and these different strategies may carry different social and political valences. Some may attempt color-blindness, while others recognize social-structural asymmetries, and others still may “celebrate diversity.” Using the large, generic category of race-bridging enables us to compare different styles of creating cross-race relationships and see which predominate among conservative Christians. That way, it is an open question whether or not conservative Christians practice “anti-racist” or “multiculturalist” or other sorts of strategies, where, with what results. To use just these two examples, anti-racism and multiculturalism rely on different ways of conceiving relations between groups, different notions of inter-group power, and therefore different understandings of how to create inter-racial collaboration (Besecke 1999; see Olneck 19xx).

Viewing boundaries with different sources of evidence

It makes sense to distinguish symbolic and social boundary-drawing inferred from survey questionnaire responses from public strategies for *articulating* symbolic boundaries identified

from ethnographic and interview evidence. This way of proceeding avoids taking beliefs about religion or race as unitary cultural essences that control action uniformly from inside our heads. We conceive the race-bridging strategies displayed in the case studies as patterned, publicly available subcultural styles that, while changeable perhaps in the longer run, are not simply made up from scratch or changed at will by race-bridging entrepreneurs (Emerson and Smith 2000; Swidler 1986). This understanding of boundary-drawing and culture more generally follows recent, broad trends in cultural analysis (see Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Wimmer and Lamont 2006). It allows a better understanding of what conservative Christianity offers as a public, cultural repertoire for bridging racial boundaries, apart from what conservative Christian individuals may think privately as Christians, as whites, or as blacks, when they answer survey questions.⁶

Care must be exercised in using these different kinds of data to tell a single story. It is possible that people engaged in race-bridging settings would not be well characterized by the average responses to national survey questions about race relations. It would have been ideal to have survey data on race-relations attitudes and practices of people in each of the case studies upon which we draw. What we can say with this combination of evidence is that privately tapped attitudes—people’s everyday, sometimes inarticulate preferences (see Swidler 1986)—may influence how easily or widely the vocabularies and practices of intentional race-bridging strategies can spread among conservative Christians. Case material suggests that sometimes, race-bridgers’ private attitudes shape or weaken their efforts to carry out a race-bridging strategy that aims to make Christ-like love overcome all racial divisions.

Survey overviews of boundary-drawing

The General Social Survey (NORC 2002) and the Social Capital Benchmark Survey (Saguaro Seminar 2000) together offer an overview of individual attitudes, preferences, and practices regarding race relations (see tables in Appendix I and II). Feelings of social distance, and attitudes and opinions regarding interracial marriage and the causes of social differences between racial groups all tell something about the ways individual conceive *symbolic* boundaries privately. Questions regarding the race of one's personal friends, or one's sociable visiting habits, begin to tell us something about *social* boundaries in individuals' worlds.

For this paper's purposes, the limits as well as opportunities of these two data sets deserve comment. Each required a different strategy for identifying "conservative Christians."⁷ Given the small *n* for some of the GSS responses, we supplemented GSS data with responses to Social Capital survey questions that tapped attitudes and practices explicitly related to race. The Social Capital survey used a rather different means of sampling Americans than the GSS. It included information on the respondent's religious denomination, which enabled us to identify respondents in terms more specific than the GSS's categories of "fundamentalist," "moderate," and "liberal," but thereby necessitated further decisions about selection. We used quite restrictive criteria for identifying conservative Christians in the GSS and Social Capital surveys, in order to lessen the likelihood of having captured non-conservative Christians in our sub-samples. Our resulting catches very likely miss some conservative Christians in each original survey. The mutually confirming patterns emerging from our two survey analyses must be considered only suggestive, then, but still worthy of further investigation.

Findings suggest that conservative white Christians draw more exclusive racial boundaries than whites in general, and in some ways are more symbolically exclusive of blacks than black conservative Christians are of whites. The GSS data indicate that conservative Christian whites feel significantly closer to whites than do whites in general, and conservative Christian blacks feel closer to whites than conservative Christian whites feel toward blacks. Almost five times more conservative Christian whites (21.5%) than conservative Christian blacks (4.8%) favored laws against interracial marriage, and conservative Christian whites were almost three times as likely to favor laws against interracial marriage as all other whites (7.3%). On the notion that racial group differences stem from inborn abilities, differences between conservative Christian whites' and conservative Christian blacks' attitudes, or between conservative Christian whites' and all other whites' attitudes, were not significant. Conservative Christian blacks were significantly *more* likely (63%) to attribute racial group differences to a "lack of will" than conservative Christian whites (55%), indicating that either a traditional Protestant or traditional American (or both) regard for individual effort is shared widely among conservative Christians across racial lines. Yet conservative Christian blacks also were much more likely to say these differences stem from discrimination (46%) than were conservative Christian whites (27%).

Data from the Social Capital Benchmark Survey point toward similar conclusions. Conservative Christian whites are significantly more likely to oppose marriage between blacks and whites (29.5%) than all other whites (16.6%). Yet, more than three-fifths of conservative Christian blacks and whites report having personal friends of the other race: 64% of whites report having a black personal friend compared to 60% of blacks' reporting that they have a

personal white friend. Conservative Christian whites, on average, visited a friend of a different race or had the friend visit their home less often (7.53 times) than did all other whites (9.65), and the difference is significant. In general whites engaged in these interracial visits less often than blacks; the differences are significant, as were the differences between all blacks and all whites on opposition to marrying interracially.

In short, some indicators show blacks in general sustaining more permeable symbolic and social boundaries than whites do, and within these broad outlines conservative Christian whites quite systematically maintain stricter boundaries than other whites. What, then, are the intentional strategies that some conservative Christian churches and community service groups engage to blur or displace racial boundaries? We look closely now at local race-bridging efforts.

Exploring a Christ-centered race-bridging strategy

The master boundary

While others have surveyed the growing evangelical literature on racial reconciliation (see Wadsworth 1997; Emerson and Smith 2000; Rehwaldt-Alexander 2004) the goal here is, first, to discern patterns of symbolic boundary-drawing in everyday action, from the point of view of the actors. A cultural analysis leads us to propose that ordinary citizens and church leaders alike do not simply put principles or how-to manuals into practice in a single, obvious way nor in randomly varying ways, but enact interracial relationships in patterned ways that the boundaries framework will illuminate. A relatively small collection of available case studies reveals some of the folk categories that white conservative Christians are working from when they try to create relationships and collectivities with African Americans.

From conservative Christian whites' point of view, their method of race-bridging is a "Christ-centered strategy," and so we will name it that. In this mode of race-bridging, participants in a relationship or collectivity are trying hard to privilege their Christian identity over other identities they would affirm either publicly or in private. They define racism as a "sin" that any good Christian must address in order to be "right with God." Within this family of strategies, race-bridging ultimately is a means to becoming a good or better Christian, a better emulator of Christ—not a social, civic, political or moral end in itself. As one member of a multi-racial church in the Northeast put it, what brings the races together, ultimately, is ". . . Christ absolutely. Because he's the only thing that doesn't discriminate. Anything else, there will be some type of bias" (Emerson and Woo 2006). Or as an assistant pastor in Atlanta described racial reconciliation, it was "a matter of losing parts of myself that I used to believe were who I am. . . [T]hat's the part that we might call distinctly our culture. And yet there's a Christ-controlled culture that somehow we need to embrace" (Rehwaldt-Alexander 2004). Churchgoers like him conceive "Christ culture" as a kind of racial zero-point. In this Christ-centered strategy, Christian identity trumps all others. It is the master symbolic boundary inside which the boundaries of other identities either continue to exist in a less marked fashion or else fade away altogether.

There are different ways to carry out a Christ-centered strategy. Evidence points towards a dominant, white conservative Christian way of drawing religious and racial boundaries in everyday settings, along with at least one alternative variant of a Christ-centered strategy seemingly taken-for-granted more and preferred by black conservative Christians.

Two sites of white conservative Christian race-bridging

Close-up case studies exist for two kinds of local sites in which white conservative Christians attempt race-bridging either by formal plan or more informal everyday efforts to create new relationships in which racial identities are at least implicitly salient. Both kinds of site, congregations and religiously based community service organizations, are important sites of civic life in the U.S. (Lichterman and Potts forthcoming).

The multi-racial congregation. Multi-racial congregations in the research literature are those in which no single racial group constitutes more than 80% of the congregation. There are few multi-racial congregations in the U.S., roughly 7% by the best estimate (Emerson and Woo 2006). It is worth taking these seriously though as sites for race-bridging, not only because they may be growing in number but also because it is plausible that they make some difference in some kinds of symbolic boundaries: Yancey (1999) found that whites who attend “interracial” churches—churches in which African-Americans are present—felt less social distance toward African Americans and were less likely to stereotype African Americans. It is unclear whether these attitudes and perceptions preceded congregants’ participation in these churches or were cultivated by the participation, but one might read them as suggesting at least that participation in such churches does not encourage members to draw even sharper symbolic boundaries due to tensions or frustrations experienced in a multi-racial church. Multi-racial church cases discussed below rely mostly on interviews with congregants regarding their own preferences and practices at church, supplemented by authors’ observations of congregational life. The discussion emphasizes shared patterns and striking divergences from the patterns, rather than the particularities of any single congregation. All the congregations are evangelical Protestant, and

all have significant white and African American participation (at least 20% each) along with participation of other racial groups in some cases. They are located in different parts of the American South or Midwest.

The religiously based community service organization. Cases include several community service organizations sponsored either by evangelical churches or individuals affiliated with evangelical churches or associations. These cases offer ethnographic evidence, along with material from interviews. Adopt-a-Family, headed by a non-profit group with a largely evangelical board of directors, was a loose network of eight evangelical congregations. Each congregation organized a volunteer group of roughly ten people to “adopt” a family whose breadwinner would be leaving the welfare rolls and attempting to enter the paid workforce in line with the welfare policy reforms of 1996. “Adopting” meant supporting family members in informal ways: Driving a mother to appointments with doctors or potential employers, helping a son get a driver’s license, babysitting children while a parent looked for work or took a break, collecting donations for the family, or having sociable events in order to develop trusting friendships with a family. The Religious Anti-Racism Coalition was mostly a pastor group of roughly 12 core members, five of them evangelical, and the others mostly mainline Protestant. The group publicized opposition to racism by holding a multicultural celebration timed to coincide with a KKK march in town, and also held a monthly speaker series on topics related to race issues. The “two moms” project, named after the lead volunteers’ self-designation, cooked and served free dinners twice monthly at the neighborhood center of a low-income neighborhood of color. These three groups all were located in a Midwestern U.S. city. Finally there is a pastor spokesperson for a social outreach group attached to a Southern Baptist church in Mississippi;

the group participated in the state’s charitable choice program for faith-based groups that received government money for offering social services. The following discussion refers to the case studies in Chart 1.

Chart 1: Qualitative case studies of conservative Christian race-bridging

Case name	type of case	study
Wilcrest Church	Multi-racial congregation	Emerson and Woo 2006; Christerson, Edwards and Emerson 2005
Crosstown Community Church	Multi-racial congregation	Christerson, Edwards and Emerson 2005
International Church of Christ	Multi-racial congregation	Jenkins 2003
Grace Fellowship Church	Multi-racial congregation	Rehwaldt-Alexander 2004
Faith Community Church	Multi-racial congregation	Rehwaldt-Alexander 2004
Joy Bible Church	Multi-racial congregation	Rehwaldt-Alexander 2004
Main Street Southern Baptist	Community service outreach	Bartkowski and Regis 2003
Adopt –a-Family	Community service organization	Lichterman 2005
Religious Anti-Racism Coalition (RARC)	Community service organization	Lichterman 2005
“two moms” project	Community service project	Lichterman 2005

Elements of the dominant Christ-centered race-bridging strategy

Proceeding inductively we read through the cases, searching for patterns of interaction (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987) that operate to some extent in the two kinds of site. Only further research can confirm our hunches that the patterns exist beyond these cases, but it is plausible to think so given present research literature along with our notion that these patterns themselves are cultural, i.e., somewhat durable, constraining rather than purely emergent and fluid (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). Two interactional patterns appear central in the dominant form of the white Christ-centered strategy. We identify these patterns in participants’ terms,

contrast them where appropriate with African American group members' understandings, then the next section focuses on several kinds of tension observed when whites and blacks try to worship or work together in these cases. We characterize these tensions sociologically as symptoms of the attempt to be "color-blind." Finally we explore an alternative Christ-centered strategy that is more socially reflexive than the dominant one.

Simplifying the social map

One common way to achieve Christ-centeredness is to suppose that racial boundaries or other social boundaries are not fully real, and thus to try minimizing, blurring (Alba 2005), or refusing to draw symbolic boundaries of race. This strategy appears especially common at Faith Community and Grace Fellowship churches, but comes out in interviews with congregants at the other multi-racial churches too. Congregants at one church spoke of achieving a "Christ culture" and losing other cultural attributes attached to racial or ethnic identity. Some congregants would say that when they walk into a room, they simply "don't see race;" this ability was a point of pride (Rehwaldt-Alexander 2004). An African American congregant at another church said that his congregation "helped me to develop relationships with people outside my race. . .I've gotten to know other people on that more personal level where I've said, 'wow, you know, it's not that much of a difference' (Christerson et al. 2005)." When people share Christ, the salience of other potential differences fades in this view. A congregation in the highly demanding International Church of Christ structured discipleship within the church to produce a similar result. Members had daily contact with "discipling partners," and these discipling groups rotated members regularly, heightening the chances of close, cross-racial contacts that would crystallize a church

identity over time, while at least ideally in church leaders' eyes, lightening racial boundaries (Jenkins 2003).

Community service projects tried the same strategy. Adopt-a-Family volunteers tried hard to simplify the social map they were using to make sense of their relation to their adopted families (Lichterman 2005). The orientation meeting for volunteers set the tone: The trainer, an African American Christian daycare teacher, told volunteers that while she knew about "cultural differences," these differences were barriers to "seeing people with God's eyes." For their part, volunteers monitored their own social biases. For instance, two volunteers in one group reminded each other not to push breast-feeding on a mother who had already decided on bottles for her newborn; that would be judgmental and risk highlighting social differences. The "two moms" project started with a similarly simple map: Inspired by prayerful reflection, they arrived at the idea of serving meals in the Park neighborhood because, they explained, they knew how to cook, and needed to find some place where there were needy people to serve. It was only later that they found out that Park had a neighborhood center with social service programs; they had not thought much about the neighborhood's social infrastructure and simply had known it as a place where poor people lived. (Lichterman 2005).

In both church and community service settings, simplifying the social map was a well-intended effort to *avoid* discriminating unfairly by race. If Christ is all that really matters on the map then, from this viewpoint, one would do well to try ignoring or minimizing other markers of personhood. Doing otherwise might risk failing the Christ-centered strategy on conservative Christian whites' own terms, and reproduce discriminatory racial boundary-drawing. One case

in our sample, represented by the pastor of Main Street Southern Baptist, illustrates this possibility.

This church participated in the state-sponsored Faith and Families of Mississippi program that gave money to churches to assist former welfare recipients. In an interview, the pastor said participants in his church's charitable choice program would realize that "if they are going to get involved in having a church and a mentorship, they. . .are going to have to face some responsibilities they don't want to face." The pastor imagined social contours to these helping relationships, even though he wanted to be race-blind and said that attitudes regarding race were very unlikely to affect the way local congregations provide social service. In his interview he offered, *unprompted*, that "Southerners have always seen themselves as having to help, say, the black community. . . Even when you had the active Ku Klux Klan and the marchers and everything, there's always been a desire to help. And I don't think that's ever been on a racial basis" (Bartkowski and Regis 2003). It would be hard to interpret the narrative here in some way other than to say the "helper" quite clearly is white and those helped are black. In this storyline, as the researchers point out, the black community is uniformly in need of "help" as well, by a "Southern" community assumed to be white. The pastor could not help but symbolize race aloud as he was discussing *religiously*-based benevolence. A perfectly Christ-centered strategy, in contrast, is attempting to be free of these kinds of racial distinctions.

Emphasis on informal interpersonal relations

For many blacks as well as the great bulk of whites at the different multi-racial churches, racial reconciliation would be successful when people are socializing informally across racial

lines. One African American congregant in a multi-racial church characterized racial reconciliation as “doing everyday normal things with them just like I would with somebody who was black. Going out to dinner with them, our kids playing together.” A white man put it similarly: “. . .[W]hen church lets out. . .it’s not pockets of people, it’s not, oh the Asians are over here, the white people are running out the door. . .the black people are pocketed and hugging and loving on each other over here. It’s everybody, all intertwined, intermixed. . .” (Rehwaldt-Alexander 2004). Pastors would tell congregants to make sure they greet worshippers of other races after services. Leaders of one congregation contacted local restaurants, asking them to offer two-for-one dinner coupons so that congregants could invite a family of another race to dinner.

Community service efforts similarly relied heavily on interpersonal socializing as a race-bridging strategy. Adopt-a-Family church volunteer groups arranged picnics, parties, and in one case a baby shower, with their “adopted” families so that the volunteers and the families could get to know one another. Adopt-a-Family’s director instructed, and volunteers agreed, that their purpose in these get-togethers was not to proselytize but to befriend: He used the metaphors of “neighbor” and “citizen” to characterize these relationships. Volunteer groups at the same time defined themselves as caring for their adopted families *because* they were servants in the spirit of Christ, not because they were neighbors or fellow citizens. So the volunteers often down-played their chosen master identity so as to socialize in a more conventional and unthreatening way.

African-American members of congregations and community service projects quite often appeared to have shared whites’ valuation, and sheer enjoyment, of interpersonal socializing across race. However, they also emphasized other elements of a race-bridging strategy more

than whites did. Blacks in Rehwaldt-Alexander's churches said sometimes that friendly socializing by itself was not enough, that congregants needed to discuss public policy issues. Black and white members of the Joy Bible Church, discussed below, agreed that political issues were a crucial part of the racial reconciliation process. Our survey data corroborate Rehwaldt-Alexander's observations, in that conservative Christian blacks were significantly more likely to interpret racial differences in terms of different educational opportunities and discrimination than were conservative Christian whites, and significantly less likely than conservative Christian whites to oppose black collective action to secure rights, or risk airing some divisive differences over worship or leadership style in their own churches. None of the studies portray African Americans who explicitly did not value interpersonal socializing across race lines; it is more that for some, this was only a part of the race-bridging picture.

Points of tension in the dominant Christ-centered strategy

Suppressing social knowledge and social markers

In the Adopt-a-Family community service group, church volunteers sometimes tried to suppress their own or others' knowledge of social differences in order to keep the Christ-centered strategy going. Several members of one church volunteer group, for instance, were social service professionals who had worked with a diverse clientele, and in one case had studied community development techniques. When these members suggested, early in Adopt-a-Family's history, that the program should take the families' own social networks and neighborhoods into account when planning activities, the suggestions generally failed to start conversation and came to appear as *non sequiturs*. Imagining the families in a context of networks and neighborhoods

would have complicated rather than simplifying the social map, and would have brought relationships beyond the purely interpersonal into the picture.

Other volunteers used more informal kinds of social knowledge to suppress social markers. Picnics and parties happened in parks, or in church social halls but not in volunteers' or families' homes so that social class differences would not be so obvious. It became clear that this was a point of potential tension when a church volunteer told the researcher that her adopted family's apartment that was too "small and dark" for group events like the afternoon barbecue currently in progress, but that such an event could not take place at her house either because the adopted family's mom "would see that our social backgrounds are different. I wouldn't want that to become a factor in the relationship" (Lichterman 2005). In a similar vein, this church group decided to have socializing events for their adopted family in their small church basement social hall instead of at one of their homes because they thought it would be too uncomfortable for the mother's sons to "go off with old white guys." They conceived the church as a socially neutral place, in comparison with private residences that might put too many distracting social markers in the way of a well-intended caring relationship.

Race-bridging was difficult with this disregard for social coordinates. It got Adopt-a-Family volunteers into a bind, for instance. They left themselves with little to go by, in effect inviting themselves into awkward situations of sharing pleasantries and trying to build relationships from scratch without being able to account for themselves openly to the families they wanted to serve. At one dinner event for all of the church volunteer groups' families, a painfully quiet dinner was followed by brief comments from the director of Adopt-a-Family, and an invitation to stay around and play board games. At the baby shower, church volunteers had a

difficult time getting the mother being celebrated at this event to say anything about her new baby—result of a pregnancy she had originally wanted to abort—and ended up putting a great deal of conversational energy into jokes about the new stroller they bought as a shower gift.

When social boundaries of race won't disappear: styles of worship and timing

Frustrations over differing worship styles marked several of the multi-racial congregations in our sample. Wilcrest church, for instance, made ongoing efforts to “diversify” its music at worship—in one instance, by adding an immigrant percussionist from Cameroon to its all-white worship band. At least one white member was not so happy, and said in an interview that “if our worship changes much more, I will be embarrassed to invite others to come. The pace of some of the music, the loudness, it is just not right” (Christerson et al. 2005). Most of Wilcrest’s non-white congregants interviewed said they wanted a wider variety of music than the typically white hymns and praise music that dominated Wilcrest’s worship; they wanted more singing, and a longer service. Similar sensibilities and divisions were apparent at Grace Fellowship and Faith Community churches.

In several of the congregations, researchers observed or heard interviewees say that different time-keeping habits were a barrier. One Sunday school teacher was annoyed that members of his adult class came up to a half-hour late to his one-hour Sunday course (Christerson et al. 2005). In examples like these, whites read people who do not arrive to worship or meetings at the stated starting time as not taking things seriously. This was the case in Rehwaldt-Alexander’s three multi-racial congregations.

Similar sentiments characterized Adopt-a-Family volunteers. Members of one church volunteer group aired their frustrations one afternoon when their adopted family still did not show up an hour after the starting time of their picnic. Frustrations and mistrust mounted when they phoned the family's home and heard from an elder daughter an account of an accident and a hospital visit that they found hard to believe. The group's informal leader said that these were the difficulties one encounters when the "church community interacts with the non-church community" and that when one "adds races in" it gets more difficult still. Another member observed in a perplexed, somewhat dismayed voice that black church services might start late and last for hours.

These differences in music and timing of activities may be widespread social differences. They become symbolic differences as people recognize them, or misrecognize them, and evaluate them in terms of worthiness, appropriateness, desirability (Lamont 1992). But do they matter really? Social research strongly suggests they do: Tastes in music are not just minor matters of leisure. People live in their musical tastes; they constitute core personal identities through music (DeNora 2000). Beyond that, people's music tastes represent to others and themselves social identities—racial and class identities, among others-- that are anything but trivial (Bryson 1996; see also Lamont and Molnar 2001).

When social boundaries of race won't disappear: networks and friendships at church

The case of Crosstown church suggests that taken-for-granted differences in relationship style might work together with more simply exclusionary intentions, making multi-racial churches difficult for congregants (Christerson et al 2005). Two white families explained to the

researchers that they were going to leave this multi-racial church because, in each case, a son or daughter was the only white in a church youth group. As they viewed it, their kids were uncomfortable and had a hard time making friends with kids who were “loud,” acted differently, had “different lifestyles.” The study suggests that the simple perception of being a white minority in a majority-black group might impel white members to depart. In another case from the same study—a case not included in this paper’s sample—whites in a majority-Filipino, Los Angeles congregation said they felt excluded from Filipino social circles at church, and found Filipino church members difficult to engage in the personal sharing that they considered the hallmark of a real, non-superficial friendship. Other studies comment little on this aspect of interracial relationship-building, emphasizing simply that interpersonal sociability matters to congregants, but it makes sense to think that different styles of relationship-building and different styles of selfhood would affect the fortunes of a multi-racial congregation that defines its mission strongly in terms of interpersonal relationship goals (see Lamont 1999). In the ICOC congregation that “discipled” intensively, for instance, leaders sometimes assigned members to discipling groups on the basis of race or ethnicity—counter to the larger principle of interpersonal, interracial solidarity—because they assumed people of like backgrounds would understand each other’s personal lives better (Jenkins 2003). It makes sense too that perceptions of exclusion or minority status among members of a socially dominant group—the one white kid in a largely black church youth group, for instance--would encourage members to withdraw, even in the absence of discomfort with the substance of the relationships.

Encountering the unsaved: master liability of a Christ-centered strategy

When people draw a Christ-centered boundary, those who are not Christian, no matter what race, may appear morally inferior. If church members see their own congregation as a representative of Christ or God's will in the world, then even others who may identify as Christian but are not congregational members may appear on the other side of a strongly exclusive boundary. In that way the Christ-centered strategy can end up drawing sharper rather than more permeable boundaries around some of the group with whom it wants to share a relationship. This was the case in Grace Fellowship and Faith Community churches. Pastors said that the real dividing lines were not between races but between Christian believers and those outside the church; the blacks to whom they reached out were not in the church and so probably were not "saved" (Rehwaldt-Alexander 2004, pp. 204-205) At Crosstown church, one white family that had intentionally sought out a multi-racial congregation later left the church after the family's teenage son said it was hard to form friendships in his church youth group. The mother said that the youth group put a lot of energy into outreach to kids in an adjacent town, Anderson, that she described as "inner city." It was a largely working-class town with a largely African American population. The mother said that "they were really reaching out to the Anderson area kids. And so, it was geared for sort of non-Christian kids. . ." Implying that lower-income black kids probably are not Christian, she characterized her son as a "white suburban kid" in need of a different church in which they could "keep him growing spiritually." The Christ-centered intention here comes cloaked in a set of preferences and assumptions regarding race and class as

well as religion—assumptions that would be hard to articulate from within the dominant Christ-centered strategy (Christerson et al. 2005).

Discussions of church leadership suggested a similar boundary issue in Grace Fellowship and Faith community churches. African American members complained that they could not take on leadership positions because the positions paid too poorly to live on. Because these evangelical churches defined freedom from financial debt as part of being a good Christian, systematic differences in the likelihood of having debts to pay off translated into lower chances of becoming church leaders (Rehwaldt-Alexander 2004).

White evangelical members of the Religious Anti-Racism Coalition (RARC) similarly emphasized religious boundaries without reflecting fully on the consequences of this emphasis for race relations. When evangelicals joined discussions on how to publicize anti-racism in their city of Lakeburg, they said repeatedly that they wanted to focus primarily on the “divisions within the church”—here meaning within the “circle of Christianity” as one pastor put it. The church was racist, they acknowledged, and needed to work on its own sins. As the KKK threatened to march in Lakeburg, RARC members debated what response to take. The proposed public event that white evangelical members of the RARC favored most was a Christian worship service, not the interfaith service that mainline Protestant pastors in the RARC favored. Mainliners and evangelicals argued for months over whether or not any worship at the event should be interfaith or Christian. Mainline members wanted to celebrate an imagined community of diverse, anti-racist and difference-affirming people in general, while evangelicals wanted to project a Christian community of believers who were owning up to the sin of racism. While mostly side-stepping or smiling quietly on the question of Jewish participation,

evangelicals repeatedly raised the concern that pagans or wiccans might attend a general public event.

In short, the white evangelicals' Christ-centered strategy drew groups far from Christianity into high relief as outsiders. Discussing the non-Christian identity of some potential participants took overwhelmingly more of the RARC's time than did discussing ways to boost attendance by people of color, Christian or not. Exclusive religious boundary-drawing took precedence over efforts to publicize this largely Christian community service group's message as widely as possible (Lichterman 2005).

Christ-centeredness as colorblindness

While conservative Christians pictured above often implied or said explicitly that racial boundaries did not matter in their own relationships, myriad social differences and dynamics belie the raceless, dominant "Christ-centered" approach. Many scholars argue that colorblindness can be seen more broadly as a neo-liberal response to the establishment of equal opportunity legislation and policy (e.g., Frankenberg 1993; Doane 1999). It affords people the chance to say that race does not matter any more because of the accomplishments of the Civil Rights agenda in the 1960s and 1970s. Colorblind positions also frequently discourage whites in more privileged social positions to question why their social location and life opportunities are different from their less fortunate brethren.

Instead, individuals who claim not to see race generally participate in society, whether consciously or not, in ways that reinforce an unequal distribution of educational, economic, and social resources between people of color and whites. For example, thick racial boundaries

sustain continual residential segregation and attendant disparities in local schools where students of color are in the majority (Massey and Denton 1993); exclusive social network and capital among professionals in the managerial world (Collins 1989), and stances of entitlement to placement in selective academic courses and school (Wells and Serna 1996).

One consequence of this race-blind approach is that it threatens to limit “servants” understandings of the meanings, functions, and utility of other cultural repertoires, as the aforementioned examples strongly suggest. Despite their Christ-centered and well-meaning intentions, conservative Christian white race-bridgers did not share the same understandings and cultural realities as African Americans, whether conservative Christians or not. We have offered a few examples of how some white conservative Christians’ actions may contradict the “we-don’t-see-race” views and strategies. Symbolic boundaries engendered by lifetimes of social and spatial boundaries (i.e., segregation) preclude some conservative Christians’ ability to connect the dots and reflect on why different conflicts emerge between the races. If, on the other hand, individuals acquire “flexible minds” (Zerubavel 1991) and are open to permeable symbolic boundaries, such socio-cultural differences are less likely to be perceived as threats, oddities, or even inferior.

A road not often traveled: Christ-centered and socially reflexive

One multi-racial church in the sample of qualitative cases, Joy Bible Church, gave evidence of race-bridging efforts different from those of the other churches. The researcher (Rehwaldt-Alexander 2004) intended the congregation as a contrast with her other two. At this church congregants discussed racial reconciliation in interpersonal terms similar to those used at

other churches. They also spoke a vocabulary of social justice not much heard in the other churches' race-bridging scenarios, and spoke little if any about color-blindness. Joy Bible Church interviewees valued pleasant interpersonal socializing as a means to creating interracial relationships, but also were taught to appreciate educational experiences: The pastor, an African American, advocated that white congregants learn about racism *from* people of color, implicitly challenging the status equality that conventional socializing presumes, and in some ways reversing the surrounding society's social hierarchy. In contrast with the other conservative Christian groups, Joy Bible Church's practice sounds closer to that of race-bridging discussion programs that a variety of secular organizations across the country as well as church groups have used (Study Circles Resource Center 1992, 1994, 1997).

The congregation also developed an interest in race issues beyond the congregation itself. On one occasion, one hundred church members attended a hearing on affordable housing. A member interpreted the event in terms of racial reconciliation: "People look out and see Joy Bible Church, they see all these different races and all these different people. . . that's how you are going to fight racism." In the same spirit the church sponsored a low-cost medical clinic and a multiracial summer camp. The church's own staff included many African Americans and whites; the pastor reported that the church needed to work more on finding Latino personnel.

Rather than try to simplify the social map into Christ-like and non-Christ-like, white and African American congregants learned to have what the pastor called a "difficult conversation about race." The pastor instituted ongoing, sometimes difficult church-wide dialogues about race relations, and congregants appeared to have committed themselves to these discussions.

They learned to imagine themselves on a more complicated map, one that always included racial and class as well as religious boundaries explicitly. Congregants tried to relate to other congregants and themselves *as* people with racial identities, as well as Christians. While united by a specifically Christian commitment against racism, they recognized *permeable* racial boundaries at the same time. In this way they tried to make racial identity itself an object of critical reflection, rather than trying to make Christ-centeredness racially blind. They had a *socially reflexive* understanding of their racial identities in relation to those of others (Lichterman 2005).

Something vaguely similar happened to the “two moms.” Having come into a low-income neighborhood as servants of Christ, the moms discovered that residents perceived them in more grounded, social terms, as outsiders with somewhat paternalistic if well-intended ideas. The moms had a “difficult conversation,” a public forum with neighborhood residents about their free-meals effort, and afterwards decided to organize the meals project alongside neighborhood residents instead of doing it for them. The two moms said in an interview that it was only after this public meeting that they felt trusted, appreciated—secure in a relationship, in other words.

Why focus on boundaries instead of beliefs?

A currently prominent treatment of white evangelicalism and race (Emerson and Smith 2000) explains that white evangelicals favor interpersonal and individualistic responses to racism because their theology conditions them to do so. In this view, theological beliefs such as “accountable freewill individualism” make it difficult for evangelicals to conceive of racial issues in social-structural terms, and also doom concrete attempts at race-building to failure.

These theological beliefs are called cognitive building blocks that make some understandings of racism and solutions to racism much easier to construct than others.

We have taken a different approach, shifting the focus from formal theological beliefs to privately held ideas about race relations and public practices of creating groups and relationships. Theological or denominational teachings may offer some of the “cognitive building blocks” that people use to answer survey questions about the causes of and solutions to racial inequality. Theologies formal or fragmentary are probably not the only cultural resources on which people—especially lay people—rely when trying to create and coordinate interracial relationships in everyday life. Here, an “agentic” perspective (Wimmer and Lamont 2006) is very helpful. It is entirely possible that particular modes of boundary-drawing loosely complement different theologies, but the historical or practical relation between the two needs research in itself and should not be taken for granted in a simple equation of formal beliefs and everyday practices.

Empirical benefits follow from the boundary approach. Putting some analytic space between theology and race-bridging practices, it helps us grasp the possibility of an alternative Christ-centered strategy pursued by people who may be no less committed to evangelical Protestant theology than other evangelicals. This approach also helps us interpret GSS data above that suggested that African American conservative Christians attribute blacks’ economic disadvantages to a “lack of will” as readily as do white conservative Christians. Black conservative Christians may share at least some theological beliefs with white counterparts, and certainly share a strong Bible-centeredness. Yet, they relate to their beliefs differently because they draw boundaries of identity differently, perhaps understanding themselves as inextricably

members of a collectivity—or rather, in a “linked fate” with other African Americans because of shared social and historical experiences (see Dawson 1994)—in a way that many whites may not. The appendices show, for instance, that in terms of attitudes and beliefs about various social issues—such as the attribution of racial inequality to discrimination—conservative and non-conservative Christian African Americans converged in their answers and offered statistically significant and different responses than conservative and non-conservative Christian whites. These findings indicate that African American conservative Christians suppose more readily than do white conservative Christians that systematic, structural opportunities, not just individual will, have something to do with economic inequality by race.

The boundaries framework assumes that social identities are multiple for anyone in a modern society. Conservative Christians inhabit other identities besides religious ones that inform their boundary-drawing, whites no less than African Americans. The boundaries framework illuminates the ways people imagine, and relate or perhaps collapse, these different identities. It bids us ask how people draw different boundaries simultaneously, helping us avoid taking non-racially marked (white) conservative Christianity as the standard for practice of the faith. In this light, we can interpret as interesting and telling, rather than simply confused, the mother’s comment quoted above, that her “white suburban” son could not grow spiritually in a group of “black inner city” kids. She drew racial, class and religious boundaries that coincided, placing her son on one side and less affluent black kids on the other side, and implying that Christian spiritual growth was possible on one side but unlikely at least for him on the other. We might interpret similarly the church volunteer leader quoted above who identified blacks with time-keeping habits different from hers as part of the “non-church community” in general. She

would not have known if the African Americans she had contact with attended church or not, so placing them in the ‘non-church community’ implied they were somehow less moral than proper churchgoers.

Our approach to conservative Christian race-bridging complements calls for more research on “lived religion,” the ways people embody their religious beliefs in particular sociocultural contexts (for instance, Hall 1997; Bender 2003; Ammerman 2007). Boundary-drawing is part of those contexts. Ironically, studies of religion sometimes assimilate uncritically their subjects’ own sense that religion *is* beliefs or theologies shorn of lived contexts, that the context is not central to “religion itself” (see Lichterman 2007). Proceeding from that viewpoint we would have to suppose there is such a thing as a pure, culturally unmediated practice of religion. Our approach in contrast supposes that religious practices and identities necessarily come embodied in contexts other than sacred texts themselves. Indeed it took *work* for evangelicals such as Adopt-a-Family volunteers to reduce their maps of the social world to one Christocentric boundary. If people assume that being a good Christian means being respectably suburban, or singing hymns which happen to derive from white-associated musical traditions, or paying off debts immediately, these characteristics are then part of lived Christianity, not “extras” that distract us from understanding “religion itself.”

Prospects for Christ-centered race-bridging

Studies reviewed here do not offer comparable criteria for “successful” race-bridging in multi-racial churches or community service organizations. The primary goal here has been to explore perceptions and everyday strategies, not to specify what it takes for multi-racial churches

or service organizations to succeed on their own terms. Still, the combination of survey data and case studies here would support Emerson and Smith's pessimistic prognosis for what we call the dominant race-bridging strategy among white conservative Christians. Where our account differs most is in its understanding of *how* the strategy works. Replacing white conservative Christian theological beliefs about individuals in society with more sociological understandings, by itself, would not likely lead to different styles of race-bridging. To give just one concrete example: The multi-racial Crosstown Church worded its mission in strikingly sociological-sounding terms, saying that congregants needed to keep "race and class issues" in the foreground of whatever they did. Even if taken to heart by all congregants, the statement by itself would not tell them exactly *how* to create an interracial religious community and judging from the evidence, it did not change worried parents' sense of who is inside and who is outside the circle.

Our analysis suggests the dominant, white Christ-centered strategy steers people away from public, "difficult conversations about race" that would be necessary to change attitudes and sensibilities tapped in the survey data. The dominant Christ-centered mode of race-bridging would be a difficult means to weakening white conservative Christians' relatively strong sense of distance from African Americans since it makes race itself appear not as real or fundamental as Christian commitments. Neither a zest for interpersonal socializing nor an attempt at color-blind Christ-centeredness would help people talk aloud and question critically their understandings of race, whatever they are. In the case of Adopt-a-Family, to use one example, volunteers felt more distant, not less, from the African American families the longer they tried building a relationship. To make sense of their frustrating experiences they began to conceive relating to their adopted families as akin to "cross-cultural" relationships that American

missionaries have with Central American peasants. They articulated their floundering relationships increasingly in terms of (far-flung) cultural differences, not shared status as children of God.

The alternative Christ-centered strategy, in contrast, may begin to cultivate difficult conversations about race. Do some kinds of people cultivate such a strategy more readily than others? Will a congregation with this strategy necessarily be led by a black pastor as in the case of Joy Bible Church? Clearly these questions require further research. The next question is to what extent this kind of race-bridging would remain institutionally insular, sequestered in churches, even if it became widespread among churchgoers. Among conservative Christians whose Christian identity is often their most important identity, the church may be the prime locus for considering social issues because the church is, ultimately, more real than the surrounding society. It is not clear, then, whether even this alternative race-bridging strategy can do much to affect symbolic boundaries that are widespread in the larger, mostly secular world beyond church. If it cannot, then it would not have much chance to influence the objectified, social boundaries within which we live our lives.

As some of our case-study researchers imply, people's propensities to draw boundaries depend partly on how socially segregated their own congregations or communities are. Social and institutional factors condition the opportunities that white or African American conservative Christians have to use their cultural sources for race-bridging, and these of course deserve more research. A focus on symbolic boundaries offers a different way of thinking about how people relate to those cultural sources, but does not by itself explain all their successes or disappointments. The framework forwarded here does offer practical leverage to people who

want to know what well-intended religious proclamations can and can't do to alter race relations in local community life.

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APPENDIX I

Table 1. Some Descriptive Statistics on “FUNDAMENTALIST” Christian Conservatives vs. Non-Fundamentalists, by Race, 2002 General Social Science Survey (GSS)

	Fundamentalist Blacks	Fundamentalist Whites	All other Blacks	All Other Whites
^a Mean response to question: How close do you feel towards Blacks	7.51*** N=84 F=64.22	5.34 N=189	8.0*** N=40 F= 77.62	5.37 N=563
^a Mean response to question: How close do you feel towards Whites	6.21*** N=84 F=18.63	7.30 N=189	6.5 N=40 F= 1.95	6.93 ^d N=564
Racial Attitudes				
% Who Favor Laws against Interracial Marriage	4.8%*** N=83	21.5% N=181	5.9 % N=34	7.3 % N=522
% Who Believe that Blacks Shouldn't Push for Rights	29.5%*** N=78	50.6% N=170		
% Responding that Racial Group Differences are due to Discrimination	46%*** N=83	27% N=177	47%* N=38	33% N=481
% Responding that Racial Group Differences are due to Inborn Disability	17% N=87	11% N=177	10% N=39	13% N=482
% Responding that Racial Group Differences are due to Lack of Education	51%*** N=86	31% N=177	42% N=40	48% N=480
% Responding that Racial Group Differences are due to Lack of Will	63%*** N=87	55% N=168	36% N=39	49% N=469

***p=0.00; **p<=.05; *p<=.10 ^d p<.05 (significant difference between Fundamentalists vs. All Other)

^a Closeness scale: 1 (not close at all) to 9 (very close) [5=neither one or the other]

Yellow highlights denote significant differences between the conservative Christians and the other groups.

APPENDIX II

Table 2. Racial Attitudes and Practices of Conservative Christians and Non-Conservative Christians, by Race, 2000 Social Capital Benchmark Survey

	Black Conservative Christians	White Conservative Christians	All Other Blacks	All Other Whites
% Has a Personal Friend Who is Black	94.6%*** N=533	63.6% N=1658	93.4%*** N=2958	59.7% N=19146
% Has a Personal Friend Who is White	76.7% N=532	97.8% N=1660	73.5% N=2959	97.8%*** N=19165
% Has a Personal Friend Who is Asian	24.9%*** N=531	30.5% N=1653	27.7%*** N=2953	37.6% N=19,108
% Has a Personal Friend Who is Latino/Hispanic	40.5% N=533	40.1% N=1653	44.0% N=2949	44.4% N=19,104
Mean Diversity of Friendship	5.95** N= 536	6.26 N=1660	6.08** N=2966	6.42 N=19217
Mean Number of Times R has had a Friend of a Different Race at Home or Visited Theirs	11.28*** N=528	7.53 N=1637	12.14*** N=2907	9.65 N=18947
Racial Attitudes				
% Who oppose marrying a Black Person	6.9%*** N=263	29.5% N=793	4.2%*** N=1478	16.6% N=9289
% Who oppose marrying a White Person	10.7%*** N=262	3.5% N=795	10%*** N=1479	1.6% N=9,314

***p=0.00; **p<= .05; *p<=.10; Yellow highlights denote significant differences between the conservative Christians and the other groups.

Table 3. Demographic Data of Social Capital Benchmark Survey Sample

	Black Conservative Christians (N=535)	White Conservative Christians (N=1655)	All Other Blacks (N= 2954)	All Other Whites (N= 19176)
% Female	64.2%**	59.4%	63.4%**	59.1%
% HS Graduates	30.3%	31.5%	27.3%	24.3%
% College Graduates	19.1%***	25.0%	23.9%***	37.8%
% Working	67.3%	60.6%	67.9%	66.5%
% Unemployed	4.5%***	1.6%	4.8%***	2.1%
Mean Age (In Years)	43.19***	49.95	41.09***	46.58

***p=0.00; **p<= .05; *p<=.10

¹ For authoritative historical overviews of Protestantism in the U.S., see among many others Marty (1981); Marsden (1991); Roof and McKinney (1987); Wuthnow (1988); Smith (1998).

² This sketch draws especially on Smith's (1998) helpful summaries of evangelical belief; see also Hunter's helpful treatment (1983).

³ See, for instance, Wuthnow (1989, 1988), Warner (1988), Marsden (1991), Hunter (1987), Michaelsen and Roof (1986), Roof and McKinney (1987), Kelley (1972).

⁴ Part of this section relies heavily on Wimmer and Lamont (2006).

⁵ For critiques of the social capital concept, see for instance Lichterman (2006, 2005); Somers (2005).

⁶ Of course private survey responses may be influenced by public or imagined public expectations.

⁷ In the GSS, respondents who identified as "fundamentalist" were counted as conservative Christians (the other categories were "moderate" and "liberal.") The Social Capital Benchmark Survey allowed respondents to identify with particular denominations, and using Smith (1998, 2000) as our initial guide, we chose and coded conservative Christian denominations that had a sufficient number of respondents for reliable analyses. We intentionally used a restrictive coding strategy, so as to select only those denominations very safely considered very largely conservative theologically. They included Southern Baptist, Independent Fundamentalist Churches, Lutheran-Missouri or Wisconsin Synods, Pentecostal-Assembly of God or Pentecostal, Church of God.