



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Taboo Topix, Pt 2:
America's Original Sin;
Knowing Good from Evil*

Genesis 2–3

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Before I start. If you are white and I step on your toes, good. We need to feel the pinch. If you aren't white and I step on your toes please let me know how I can improve. Either way let's keep talking.

White supremacy and racism are called America's original sin because like the theological concept of original sin—that humans are hard-wired to be sinful because Adam and Eve rebelled against God—it sticks with us. Our Taboo Topic this Sunday is racism.

GENESIS 2: 16–17

^{16–17}*GOD commanded the Man (Adam), "You can eat from any tree in the garden, except from the Tree-of-Knowledge-of-Good-and-Evil. Don't eat from it. The moment you eat from that tree, you're dead."*

GENESIS 3: 1–5

¹*The serpent was clever, more clever than any wild animal God had made. He spoke to the Woman (Eve): "Do I understand that God told you not to eat from any tree in the garden?"*

^{2–3}*The Woman said to the serpent, "Not at all. We can eat from the trees in the garden. It's only about the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, 'Don't eat from it; don't even touch it or you'll die.'"*

^{4–5}*The serpent told the Woman, "You won't die. God knows that the moment you eat from that tree, you'll see what's really going on. You'll be just like God, knowing everything, ranging all the way from good to evil."*

Long story short, they ate the fruit, saw one another's nakedness, and were told by God that the great picnic in the Garden of Eden was over. As the story goes this was the moment when humanity assumed the ability to know good from evil. And not only that, henceforth, life would be hard. Childbirth would be painful, husbands and wives wouldn't understand one another as well, and life would become one long day of work from cradle to grave. Thanks a lot Adam and Eve.

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Thousands of years after it was written, this Biblical story was interpreted to include the concept of Original Sin. Original Sin suggests that Adam and Eve's decision to turn away from God fated or hard-wired the rest of humanity to do the same.

SPEAKING OF SIN; ANNIVERSARY OF SLAVERY ON THE CONTINENT

I wonder if that can account for this year's despicable anniversary: 400 years since the first African slave was brought to North America. Now I will confess that even though I have studied the story of slavery and racism in this country, the gravity of this shameful anniversary hit me hard this year. To help wrap my head around it I sat down and made a timeline to try to get some visual grasp of what 400 years looks like.

Over the last 400 years, well over half of the time—246 years—those of African descent were enslaved and legally categorized as less than human. In late 1865, the 13th Amendment abolished slavery. However, most slaves had little capital to begin their lives anew and were relegated to lives of poverty and extreme prejudice. Not long after the 13th Amendment, Jim Crow Laws quickly usurped basic human rights once again, entrenching segregation, suppressing voting, and more. Let's not forget this Jim Crow Era was the era in which the KKK was founded, and the period in which Confederate monuments were erected to exhibit white supremacy. This Jim Crow period lasted about a hundred years. It wasn't until 1964, and the passage of the Civil Rights Act, that our nation took the next step towards equality.

These numbers are what sank me. Of these 400 years, 246 have been in literal and legal slavery. The next 99 years were as second-class citizens, at best. Only the last 55 years have been on equal footing, if only legally speaking. In other words, only 14% of the time have African American sisters and brothers had legal protections. The other 86% of the time is an ugly soul-stain on our nation's history.

We know good from evil well enough to know that this is evil.

Bob Hulteen and Jim Wallis of the Sojourners Christian community go back even further and put it this way:

The violence and brutality instigated by Columbus and carried on by subsequent “explorers,” “pioneers,” and “settlers” can scarcely be denied....Through a combination of military campaigns and disease-borne extermination, the [so-called] “Indians” suffered a holocaust.

The near destruction of the indigenous population...led to the second great evil in founding the nations of the Western Hemisphere—the slave trade. [Kidnapped Africans made into property died by the millions along with their Native American brothers and sisters, and those who survived were forced to endure one of the most cruel forms of slavery in human history.]

These founding events of the American nations are not just historical. They also have theological meaning. This systematic violence, both physical and spiritual, done first to indigenous people and then to black Africans was the original sin of the American nations.¹

KNOWING GOOD FROM EVIL; STRUCTURAL RACISM AND IT GOES BEYOND JUST BLACK & WHITE

White supremacy and racism are called “America’s original sin” because like the theological concept of original sin from Adam and Eve (that humans are hard-wired to be sinful because Adam and Eve rebelled against God) it sticks with us. It’s legacy lives on. Now buckle up, because I’m going to quickly run down what this legacy of sin looks like even today.

Prejudice. In a 2012 poll, 51% of Americans expressed anti-black sentiments, and 52% of non-Hispanic whites expressed anti-Hispanic attitudes. Sadly, the poll showed that these numbers are on the rise when compared to a 2008 poll.²

¹“America’s Original Sin; A Study Guide on White Racism,” pg 3.

²Sonya Ross and Jennifer Agiesta. “AP POLL: MAJORITY HARBOR PREJUDICE AGAINST BLACKS.” Associated Press: The Big Story. Accessed March 2, 2014. <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/ap-poll-majority-harbor-prejudice-against-blacks>

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Hate crimes. According to a report from the FBI, hate crimes based on race were by far the biggest category...Among those, nearly half were anti-black crimes, and nearly 10 percent were anti-Latino. About one in five were anti-white, although white people were still *much less likely*, to suffer a hate crime than minority groups when accounting for total population.

[Josh and I got of glimpse of the deep psychological effect of such hate crimes just two weeks ago when we visited Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church in Philadelphia, a mostly African American congregation. The Charleston mass shooting was very much still on their minds. You recall when white supremacist Dylann Roof entered Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church and murdered nine African American churchgoers who were attending a prayer meeting. Roof's goal was to start a race war.]

Wealth statistic. The median Black family, with just over \$3,500, owns just 2 percent of the wealth of the nearly \$147,000 the median White family owns. The median Latino family, with just over \$6,500, owns just 4 percent of the wealth of the median White family. Put differently, the median White family has 41 times more wealth than the median Black family and 22 times more wealth than the median Latino family.³

Criminal Justice. The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics concluded that an African American male born in 2001 has a 32% chance of going to jail in his lifetime, while a Latino male has a 17% chance, and a white male only has a 6% chance.⁴ In 2010, the U.S. Sentencing Commission reported that African Americans receive longer sentences than whites through the federal system for the same crimes.⁵

Study after study shows that black and brown people face an uphill slog on life's path, not only in the afore mentioned

³<https://inequality.org/facts/racial-inequality/#racial-wealth-divide>

⁴Thomas P Bonczar and Allen J. Beck, Ph.D, "Lifetime Likelihood of Going to State or Federal Prison." Bureau of Justice Statistics. Accessed March 1, 2014. <http://bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/Llgsfp.pdf>

⁵Bill Quigley, "Fourteen Examples of Racism in Criminal Justice System." The Huffington Post. Accessed March 1, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bill-quigley/fourteen-examples-of-raci_b_658947.html.

areas of criminal justice, prejudice, hate crimes and wealth, but also when it comes to:

- **Employment.** Resumes with “black sounding” names get fewer call backs.
- **Education.** The US Department of Education found that children of color are three times more likely to be suspended than their white classmates for the same infraction.⁷
- **Housing discrimination.** 2013 nation-wide Housing and Urban Development study “found that people of color looking for homes are told about and shown fewer homes and apartments than their white counterparts” and that “This type of discrimination raises the costs of the housing search for people of color and restricts their housing options.”⁸

We know good from evil well enough to know this is not good.

“...even being tennis legend Serena Williams doesn’t entirely protect you. You can be the world’s greatest athlete and have a good understanding of your own body and it can still be challenging to advocate for yourself.”

Let me explain in the words of Dr Neel Shah, Assistant Professor of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Biology at Harvard Medical School: “Serena Williams had a known clotting disorder. She’d had a blood clot in her lungs before, so she was familiar with what it felt like. After she had her baby, she developed a blood clot in her lungs and she had to strongly advocate for treatment. The clinicians didn’t initially believe her, and this delayed treatment.

Dr. Shah goes on: “...black women are three to four times more likely to die in childbirth than white women. That seems to be

⁶<https://www.nber.org/papers/w9873>

⁷<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-discipline-snapshot.pdf>

⁸https://www.huduser.gov/portal/Publications/pdf/HUD-514_HDS2012.pdf

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the case irrespective of education or income or other factors we think of as making people vulnerable.

“...when they [black women] described their symptoms and expressed concern about what was happening to them, particularly around pain, we [health care professionals] believed them less...” This led to “avoidable injury, avoidable death, and avoidable suffering.” As news-comedian/satirist John Oliver put it, “We are literally misbelieving black women to death.”

Wow. We can probably presume that these medical professionals aren't secret members of white nationalist groups, or raging racists. But all of these statistics show how the legacy of our nation's original sin of racism carries forward in what are sometimes inconspicuous, but life-changing, ways. Systemic racism is woven into the very fabric of our nation. **We know good from evil...**

CHOOSING TO BE BLACK AND BRETHREN, ERIC BISHOP

The Church of the Brethren has a pretty solid history when it comes to slavery and racism. Though most of them didn't fight in the Civil War because they were Christian pacifists, most Brethren, even in the South, were on the right side. Brethren, even some in this very room, participated in the Civil Rights movement in the 60s. You can see Church of the Brethren signs in famous photos from those marches. **We've known good from evil in the past. I wonder, do we still know it today?**

There was an enlightening article recently (May) in the Church of the Brethren's *Messenger* magazine, by a good friend of mine, Eric Bishop. It's entitled “Choosing to Be Black and Brethren.” In it, Eric wrestles with this very question of where the Church of the Brethren lies today. He says:

“There is a constant reminder for black Americans and people of color that we live in a country built by us, but not for us. The very laws and proclamations that should protect us are either used against us or ignored when it comes to working

for us. When we exercise our free-speech rights, we are told to shut up and dribble, or just stand and be patriotic.

Being black and Brethren means that in this struggle I am segregated from my true self because the Brethren half of me does not know how to engage. My resolve to be part of a peace church, a justice church, a church that has stood on the right sides of history, is met with emptiness—not because I think my church does not want to engage but because it is scared and it is unaware of how to engage. The whiteness of my church manifests paralysis in the face of social conflicts that require an engagement or understanding of the very neighbors it ignores.

We know good from evil, and this is not the path we want to be on.

SO NOW WHAT?

I don't really buy the concept of Original Sin, theologically speaking. God creates two people who make a mistake, and then God allows their one mistake to doom the rest of humanity to inevitable sinfulness for time and eternity? I don't see God working that way.

But what I do believe this story shows is that sin can create powerful legacies. For example, we see the way a father's anger can impact his children and his children's children. We see how the sin of economic greed can soil the land and air for centuries. We've seen the way a national leader's lust for power or revenge can create poverty that lasts generations. We've witnessed the way that the sins of slavery and racism have not only negatively impacted the lives of people of color, but troubled an entire nation's psyche even to this day.

And here's the upside of Adam and Eve—now we know good from evil. And we know from Jesus that we can do something about it, and that anything can be transformed with God. So here's what I want us to do.

Educate yourself. Read. Study. If you're white, seek out voices of those who do not have the luxury of the white experience in

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America. Those who attended National Older Adult Conference this past week heard Dr. Drew Hart, teacher author and activist talked about what it is to be an anti-racist. Dr. Hart will be speaking here at Etown CoB, October 23.

Transform yourself. You heard how the legacy of racism has sown wicked seeds in our society. It has sown them in us as well. Exposure to this legacy can make people of color feel inferior, and sow racism into white people. I believe that in Jesus we can all be transformed to our best selves. We know good from evil.

Engage; confront the sin of Racism. It's not enough to simply try not to be a racist. We have to be actively engaged as anti-racists. Do not tolerate racist jokes when they are told in your presence. Vote. Let's make new friends. Let's convert our friends who don't yet see the evil that exists.

We know the difference between good and evil.

