

# AMERICA'S ORIGINAL SIN

---

Racism, White Privilege,  
*and the*  
Bridge to a New America

JIM WALLIS



**BrazosPress**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Jim Wallis, *America's Original Sin*  
Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2016. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2016 by Jim Wallis

Published by Brazos Press  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wallis, Jim.

America's original sin : racism, white privilege, and the bridge to a new America / Jim Wallis.

pages cm

Includes index.

ISBN 978-1-58743-342-9 (cloth)

1. United States—Race relations. 2. Racism—United States. I. Title.

E185.615.W3125 2016

305.800973—dc23

2015030263

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2011

Scripture quotations labeled GW are from *GOD'S WORD*®. © 1995 God's Word to the Nations. Used by permission of Baker Publishing Group.

Scripture quotations labeled NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Scripture quotations labeled NKJV are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled RSV are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled TLB are from *The Living Bible*, copyright © 1971. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

“You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught” by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, copyright © 1949 by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. Copyright renewed WILLIAMSON MUSIC owner of publication and allied rights throughout the World. International copyright secured. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

16 17 18 19 20 21 22      7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
Jim Wallis, *America's Original Sin*

Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2016. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

*To Vincent Harding  
Elder, Mentor, and Friend*

# Contents

Foreword by Bryan Stevenson	xi
Preface: June 17	xv
Introduction: You Will Know the Truth, and the Truth Will Set You Free	xix
1. Race Is a Story	1
2. The Parables of Ferguson and Baltimore	11
3. The Original Sin and Its Legacy	33
4. Repentance Means More Than Just Saying You're Sorry	57
5. Dying to Whiteness	73
6. A Segregated Church or a Beloved Community?	97
7. From Warriors to Guardians	127
8. The New Jim Crow and Restorative Justice	155
9. Welcoming the Stranger	167
10. Crossing the Bridge to a New America	187
Afterword	221
Acknowledgments	227
Index	233

# Foreword

BRYAN STEVENSON

Late one night several years ago, I was getting out of my car on an empty midtown Atlanta street when a man standing fifteen feet away pointed a gun at me and threatened to “blow my head off.” I had just moved to the neighborhood, which I didn’t consider to be a high-crime area. Panicked thoughts raced through my mind as the threat was repeated. I quickly realized that my first instinct to run was misguided and dangerous, so I fearfully raised my hands in helpless, terrifying submission to the barrel of a handgun. I tried to stay calm and begged the man not to shoot me, repeating over and over again, “It’s alright, it’s okay.”

As a young attorney working on criminal cases, I knew that my survival required careful, strategic thinking. I had to stay calm. I’d just returned home from my office with a car filled with legal papers, but I knew the man holding the gun wasn’t targeting me because he thought I was a

---

Bryan Stevenson is a widely acclaimed public interest lawyer, the founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, and the author of *Just Mercy*. He has spent his career advocating for the poor, the incarcerated, and the condemned, including successfully arguing several cases before the United States Supreme Court. Stevenson and his staff have won reversals, relief, or release for over 115 wrongly condemned prisoners on death row. He is also a member of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing.

young professional. A young, bearded black man dressed casually in jeans, I didn't look like a lawyer with a Harvard Law School degree to most people; I just looked like a black man in America. I had spent much of my life in the church. I graduated from a Christian college and was steeped in Dr. King's teachings of nonviolence, but none of that mattered to the Atlanta police officer threatening to kill me. To that officer, I looked like a criminal, dangerous and guilty.

People of color in the United States, particularly young black men, are burdened with a presumption of guilt and dangerousness. Some version of what happened to me has been unfairly experienced by hundreds of thousands of black and brown people throughout this country. As a consequence of our nation's historical failure to address the legacy of racial inequality, the presumption of guilt and the racial narrative that created it have significantly shaped every institution in American society, especially our criminal justice system.

While the mainstream church has been largely silent or worse, our nation has rationalized racial injustice ever since we first ignored the claims and rights of Native people, who were subjected to genocide and forced displacement.

Millions of African people were brought to America in chains, enslaved by a narrative of racial difference that was crafted to justify captivity and domination. Involuntary servitude was banned by the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, but nothing was done to confront the ideology of white supremacy. Slavery didn't end in 1865; it just evolved. Until the 1950s, thousands of black people were routinely lynched in acts of racial terror, often while many in the white community stood by and cheered. Throughout much of the twentieth century, African Americans were marginalized by racial segregation and silenced by humiliating Jim Crow laws that denied basic economic, social, and political rights.

The country made progress dismantling the most obvious forms of racial bigotry in the 1960s, but we refused to commit ourselves to a process of truth and reconciliation. Consequently, new forms of racial subordination have emerged. The complicity of the church continues to haunt us and undermine the credibility of too many faith leaders.

We are currently in an era of mass incarceration and excessive punishment in which the politics of fear and anger reinforce the narrative of racial difference. We imprison people of color at record levels by making

up new crimes, which are disproportionately enforced against those who are black or brown. We are the nation with the highest rate of incarceration in the world, a phenomenon that is inexorably linked to our history of racial inequality.

The Justice Department projects that one in three black males born in the twenty-first century is expected to go to jail or prison at some point during his lifetime. Only in a country where we have learned to tolerate evidence of racial injustice would this be seen as something other than a national crisis.

That night in Atlanta, I was sitting in front of my apartment, in my parked, beat-up Honda Civic for ten or fifteen minutes listening to music after a long day of work. I had apparently attracted someone's attention simply by sitting in the car too long, and the police were summoned. Getting out of my car to explain to the police officer that this was my home and that everything was okay is what prompted him to pull his weapon and threaten to shoot me. Having drawn his weapon, the officer and his partner justified their overreaction by dramatizing their fears and suspicions about me. They threw me on the back of the vehicle, searched my car illegally, and kept me on the street for nearly fifteen humiliating minutes while neighbors got a look at the dangerous black man in their midst. When no crime could be discovered, I was told by the police officers to consider myself lucky. Although it was said as a taunt and threat, they were right: I was lucky; I survived. Sometimes the presumption of guilt results in young black men being killed.

From Ferguson, Missouri, to Charleston, South Carolina, communities are suffering the lethal consequences of our collective silence about racial injustice. The church should be a source of truth in a nation that has lost its way. As the dominant religion in the United States, Christianity is directly implicated when we Christians fail to speak more honestly about the legacy of racial inequality. Evangelicals, in particular, have much to overcome, given our tolerance of racial bias over the years.

This is a critically important time, when leaders of faith need to address issues of race more thoughtfully, prayerfully, and courageously. As the visionary and prophetic leader of Sojourners, Jim Wallis has been speaking truth to power for decades. This new work is timely, urgent, and necessary.

We expect too little of law enforcement officials when we fail to hold them accountable for the misjudgments represented by the shooting deaths

of so many unarmed people of color. We expect too little of the church when we accept its silence in the face of these tragedies.

We expect too much of the poor and people of color, who have carried the burden of presumptive dangerousness for far too long. We expect too much of the marginalized and menaced when we ask them to stay calm and quiet in the face of persistent threats and abuse created by our history of racial inequality.

No historic presidential election, no athlete or entertainer's success, no silent tolerance of one another is enough to create the truth and reconciliation needed to eliminate racial inequality or the presumption of guilt. We're going to have to collectively acknowledge our failures at dealing with racial bias. People of faith are going to have to raise their voices and take action. Reading this extraordinary new work by Jim Wallis is a very good place to start.



# Preface

*June 17*

On Wednesday, June 17, 2015, a young believer in white supremacy invaded the sanctuary of historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Charleston, South Carolina. There he murdered nine black Christians who were gathered for their Wednesday night prayer meeting. When the killer entered the church, he was welcomed by the church members, and he sat with them for more than an hour before he pulled out his gun and shot them dead at the prayer table. They were targeted and killed because they were black.

I had just finished writing this book when the Charleston killings occurred. This horrific event in American history—our current history—will likely set the tone and the framework for a new national conversation on racism. This massacre must be turned into a redemptive moment. Charleston showed how painfully true it still is—in 2015, in the United States—that there is still no safe place for black people in America, even in the sacred space of their own churches. That must change absolutely, unequivocally, and fundamentally in every aspect of American life.

Racism is America's original sin and must be named as such. Sometimes it expresses itself explicitly and overtly, with the Charleston murders being perhaps the most extreme example in decades. But racism lingers far more

pervasively in implicit and covert ways in American institutions and culture, in often unconscious attitudes, and in the very structures of our society.

The horror at and rejection of Dylann Roof's extreme act of white supremacy was undoubtedly sincere, uniting South Carolinians of all races. But as I write this, it remains to be seen if this racial atrocity will awaken the soul of white America and create a multiracial commitment to ending the lingering sins of systemic racism. Will the continuing racial injustice in America be more forthrightly addressed by all of us? That will be the moral test of white America's soul.

If we are willing to go deeper, we will see that white privilege is the legacy of white supremacy. White privilege is the assumption of racial entitlement and the *normality* of whiteness, something that most of those of us who are white still fail to recognize or resist. The only redemption of the sin of June 17 is to name the sin of racism and to ask ourselves what true repentance means. As the Bible teaches, repentance is much more than saying we are brokenhearted and sorry; it means turning in a totally new direction.

The killings at Mother Emanuel AME were indeed a terrorist act, part of the continuing terror of white violence that has threatened black men, women, and children ever since they were brought to the United States as slaves. The ideology of white supremacy has always used the practice and fear of violence against innocent black people to intimidate and subjugate them. That's the definition of terrorism.<sup>1</sup> We frequently call violence committed by foreign nationals against Americans terrorism, but usually not the violence we commit against one another—especially the historic white violence against blacks and Native Americans. But the intent is the same, so the term we use to describe it should also be the same.

In all the recent killings of young black men that have caught the country's attention, defenders of police behavior or the behavior of civilian shooters have often pointed to something the young men allegedly did or might have done: making eye contact with the police, running, holding a water pistol or BB gun, reaching for a driver's license or something else that could have been a gun, walking at night in a predominantly white neighborhood, playing loud music, selling illegal cigarettes, being large and threatening, and so on. But the victims at Mother Emanuel were mostly

1. "Definitions of Terrorism in the U.S. Code," Federal Bureau of Investigation, <https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/terrorism/terrorism-definition>.

older people in their own church having a prayer meeting. Dylann Roof reportedly told these innocent victims before he killed them, “You rape our women and you are taking over our country. And you have to go.”<sup>2</sup>

The Confederate battle flag, emblazoned all over the murderer’s website, received a lot of attention in the days following the massacre. South Carolina’s governor, along with other politicians who had accepted or supported the flag being flown on the state capitol grounds before the killings took place, changed their minds almost overnight. The Confederate flag had been raised above the South Carolina statehouse in 1962—in direct defiance of racial integration and the civil rights movement<sup>3</sup>—and has been used as an emblem of white hate and violence against black people ever since. It is therefore an anti-Christian flag that helped inspire the murder of black Christians on June 17, 2015. Only since then have many southern white Christian political leaders called for bringing down what many consider a “deeply offensive symbol of a brutally oppressive past,” as Gov. Nikki Haley put it.<sup>4</sup> I hope that by the time you read this book, many more Confederate flags will have been taken down and removed from all state signs and license plates, and that Confederate merchandise will have been taken out of all of our stores.

That being said, it’s even more important that we move from symbols to substance. It’s time to repent from our original sin of racism by repairing our racialized policing and criminal justice system, by restoring voting rights to all Americans, by striving to undo the profound inequities in our education system, and by ensuring that the same economic opportunities are available to people of all races.

Dealing with our lingering racial sins is the only way to truly honor those who died in that Charleston church. These victims exemplified the image and love of God among us and put a lie to white supremacy. President Obama delivered the eulogy at the funeral for State Senator Clementa

2. Karen Workman and Andrea Kannapell, “The Charleston Shooting: What Happened,” *New York Times*, June 18, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/18/us/the-charleston-shooting-what-happened.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/18/us/the-charleston-shooting-what-happened.html?_r=0).

3. Justin Wm. Moyer, “Why South Carolina’s Confederate Flag Isn’t at Half-Staff after Church Shooting,” *Washington Post*, June 19, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/06/19/why-south-carolinas-confederate-flag-isnt-at-half-mast-after-church-shooting/>.

4. Nikki Haley, “Transcript: Gov. Nikki Haley of South Carolina on Removing the Confederate Flag,” *New York Times*, June 22, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/22/us/Transcript-Gov-Nikki-R-Haley-of-South-Carolina-Addresses-Removing-the-Confederate-Battle-Flag.html>.

Pinckney, who was also Mother Emanuel’s pastor. He called each of the victims a sign of God’s amazing grace. The president then broke into song with “Amazing Grace” in a moment such as we have never seen before, signaling how such grace could take us all to a higher place. The powerful service reminded us that each of these black Americans was a child of God whose life on this earth was exterminated by the explicit sin of white supremacy. Millions of other people of color, who are also created in the image of God, have their lives regularly interrupted, undermined, and assaulted by the implicit sins of continuing racism.

On the day that Dylann Roof appeared in court for the first time, family members of the people killed were there. Although there was no plan beforehand, some of them decided to speak directly to Roof. Nadine Collier startled the courtroom when she said, “I forgive you and have mercy on your soul.”<sup>5</sup> Her mother, Ethel Lance, had been one of the shooter’s victims. Alana Simmons, whose grandfather had been killed, then stood up and said, “We are here to combat hate-filled actions with love-filled actions. . . . And that is what we want to get out to the world.”<sup>6</sup> Despite their anger and pain, others offered forgiveness to the young white supremacist.

The anguish, grace, and forgiveness of one family member after another stunned the world. Those families are not just victims now. They set the tone for the new national conversation—and action—on race that is long overdue. They want and will require justice but are also offering forgiveness. They have told the country that love is stronger than hate, and that only love can defeat hate. We must fight the things that we know are wrong, but without being wrong ourselves. It’s time for white Christians to be more Christian than white—which is necessary to make racial reconciliation and healing possible. That’s what the country and, more important, what God is now waiting for.

5. Lizette Alvarez, “Charleston Families Hope Words Endure Past Shooting,” *New York Times*, June 24, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/us/charleston-families-hope-words-endure-past-shooting.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/us/charleston-families-hope-words-endure-past-shooting.html?_r=0).

6. *Ibid.*

# Introduction

## *You Will Know the Truth, and the Truth Will Set You Free*

In John 8:32, Jesus says, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,”<sup>1</sup> which is one of those moral statements that breaks through the confusion and chaos of our lives.

Untruths that we believe are able to control us, dominate us, and set us on the wrong path. Untruths are burdens to bear and can even be idols that hold us captive—not allowing us to be free people who understand ourselves and the world truthfully.

The families of the Charleston victims have spoken grace and truth, and their example could inspire us to acknowledge and change the truths about race in America. Their grace will test the integrity of our truth and our response. Will we seek, tell, and respond to the truth as we go deeper in our needed new national conversation and action on racism in America?

For example, we have seen and heard painful revelations about how police—and, even more systematically, the criminal justice system—too often mistreat young men and women of color. These revelations are classic

1. The New International Version (NIV) uses the wording “the truth will *set* you free.” I use the two wordings interchangeably for the purposes of this introduction.

examples of how we handle truth questions. What is true, what is right, what holds us captive, and what can set all of us free?

What happened in these incidents? And are they *just* “incidents,” or is there a pattern here? Is there really just one criminal justice system for all of us—equally—or are there actually different systems for white Americans and for Americans of color? Can we look at that truthfully?

Are we hiding behind untruths that help make us feel more comfortable, or are we willing to seek the truth, even if that is uncomfortable? The Gospel text cited above is telling us that only by seeking the truth are we made *free*, and that hanging on to untruths can keep us *captive* to comfortable illusions.

And if the untruths are, more deeply, *idols*, they also separate us from God—which is, obviously, highly important for those of us who are people of faith.

The title of this book, *America’s Original Sin*, is itself unsettling and, for many, provocative. We first used the phrase in a 1987 cover story for *Sojourners* magazine. The language of “America’s original sin” helped me understand that the historical racism against America’s Indigenous people and enslaved Africans was indeed a *sin*, and one upon which this country was founded. This helps to explain a lot, because if we are able to recognize that the sin still lingers, we can better understand issues before us today and deal with them more deeply, honestly, and even spiritually—which is essential if we are to make progress toward real solutions.

New York City police commissioner William Bratton acknowledged at a church breakfast in 2014 the negative role of police against African Americans throughout American history. “Many of the worst parts of black history would have been impossible without police,” Bratton said.<sup>2</sup> You can imagine my surprise when he then used the language of original sin: “Slavery, our country’s *original sin*, sat on a foundation codified by laws enforced by police, by slave-catchers.”<sup>3</sup> Bratton is no theologian or liberal academic but rather an experienced, knowledgeable, and tough cop. In fact, Bratton has been a controversial figure in New York, coming under fire for his “broken windows” policing strategy that focuses on

2. Ross Barkan, “Bratton: Police Made Worst Moments of Black History Possible,” *Observer*, February 24, 2015, <http://observer.com/2015/02/bratton-worst-parts-of-black-history-wouldnt-have-been-possible-without-cops/>.

3. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

aggressively targeting low-level offenses in order to deter more serious crime—a strategy that many say disproportionately affects people of color.<sup>4</sup>

Bratton reminded fellow New Yorkers that the colonial founder of New York City, the Dutchman Peter Stuyvesant, was a supporter of the slavery system and created a police force to enforce and protect it. “Since then,” said the commissioner, “the stories of police and black citizens have been intertwined again and again.”<sup>5</sup> He called the role of the NYPD sometimes “corrosive” in race relations. Bratton was talking about how the “original sin” has lingered in our criminal justice system, which is a reality that many people of color experience.

I agree with Commissioner Bratton that telling the truth about America’s original sin is the best way to deal with it and ultimately be free of it. That makes moral and practical sense. Yet the truth of systemic injustice in the past and present must also compel us to *action*. It remains to be seen whether Bratton’s acknowledgment of the historical issues translates into a commitment to real and ongoing reforms in how his police do their jobs.

I wrote this book to talk honestly about America’s original sin and how it still lingers in our criminal justice system and too many other areas of American life. To treat these issues as sin—which can be repented of and changed—is a deeper, more effective way to solve these problems than just seeing them as political issues in an illusory “postracial” America.

The painful and combustible connection between poverty, crime, and hopelessness is another of our lingering national sins. Joblessness leads to hopelessness; if we don’t do a better job of educating *all* our children, they will struggle to find decent jobs, and without education and jobs it’s very hard to build the strong families that all humans so critically need.

I am often puzzled by the question that some middle-class white people ask when they see protests about economic inequality and unequal criminal justice. The question, asked directly or indirectly, usually seems to be, “What do they want?” And the “they” always implies people of color.

The best answer I’ve heard lately to that question came from a young black man I met in Ferguson, Missouri. He said, “What do I want? I want an education, a job, and a family.” Well, that’s what my two boys want,

4. Christopher Mathias, “Bratton Says Police to Blame for ‘Worst Parts’ of Black History, but Reform Advocates Are Unimpressed,” *Huffington Post*, February 24, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/24/william-bratton-nypd-slavery-history-broken-windows\\_n\\_6746906.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/24/william-bratton-nypd-slavery-history-broken-windows_n_6746906.html).

5. Barkan, “Police Made Worst Moments.”

and that's what I want for them—it's what all parents want for their kids. And the undeniable fact is that those who are being *left out* without an education, a job, and a family are overwhelmingly people of color in America, black and Native Americans most of all—that's the strongest proof of the lingering power of America's original sin.

Recessions and recoveries come and go, while whole communities of people are left behind, never enjoying "recovery," in predominantly black and brown neighborhoods across the country. Law enforcement is then expected to control or at least contain the predictable outcomes of poverty's chaos, pain, anger, and hopelessness in those black and brown neighborhoods, while the rest of us evade our responsibility to end that poverty and hopelessness.

Our criminal justice system just can't control the results of such poverty, even when it militarizes to do so. Add to that mix the clear racial bias of too many police officers, departments, and *cultures*, and you get the explosive and even deadly results that we have witnessed across the nation. These are more than merely social issues; these are spiritual issues that speak to the lingering and, yes, *evil power* of America's original sin. Sin can be repented of and changed, but only when we acknowledge it for what it is.

One of the most central lingering sins that I focus on in this book is white privilege. I am a white man in America, and I write this book as a white male, a white dad, and a white Christian. For most of my adult life I lived in low-income neighborhoods that have been predominantly black. Confrontation with white racism in my childhood in Detroit and in white churches has been the primary converting experience in my own faith history. It set me on a path that has defined my understanding of faith ever since—a story this book lays out. Allies and companions in black churches and communities have been principal shapers of my direction and vocation.

But no matter where you go as a white person in American society, no matter where you live, no matter who your friends and allies are, and no matter what you do to help overcome racism, you can never escape white privilege in America if you are white. I benefit from white privilege (and male privilege as well) every single day, and I don't have any more say in that than black men and women who experience the opposite. What white responsibility means, in the face of these benefits, is a central theme of my book.



I wrote this book because I believe truth-telling about America's original sin of racism must not be left to people of color alone. Crossing the bridge to a new America will be a multiracial task and vocation.

As I have talked with black friends about this book, especially with black parents, the line that has elicited the most response is this one: "If white Christians acted more Christian than white, black parents would have less to fear for their children." Some of their reactions have been, "Are you really going to say that?" "Oh my, what are white Christians going to say about that?" "That's going to stir things up!" And, "You're going to need some of us to have your back on this one." Do I think white people and white Christians can hear this? I truly hope so. And if we can, I believe we might see a new day in our churches and help the nation move to a different kind of future.

Policing isn't our only issue, nor are the systemic reforms our criminal justice practices need. So this book is also a *primer* on the underlying racism that still exists in America and that lies beneath the deep tensions related to the police killings that have recently refocused the nation's attention. We will try to look truthfully at underlying racial injustices, misunderstandings, and conflicts that continue to hold us back from being the country we can and should be. We will look at these crucial questions both structurally and spiritually. The book also describes how a new generation, of all races, is ready to deal with America's original sin in new and hopeful ways.

In the following pages we will take a positive, hopeful, and forward-looking approach. We will talk about what it means to "repent" of our original sin—and repentance means more than just saying you're sorry. It means turning in a new and better direction, which I believe we can do. We look backward in order to look forward. And this book makes a spiritual statement: our racial diversity and social pluralism are a great strength and a gift for our future, because our *primary* identity is as the children of God—all of us are created in God's image. Thinking about ourselves in that deeper way helps us to sort out a lot of things.

So what can the truth do for us?

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you *defensive*? I think we can do better than that.

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you *dishonest*? I don't think we want to keep doing that.

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you *deceptive*? We've seen way too much of that from public officials, and many people are now calling for accountability.

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you *bitter*? That just makes us miserable, and miserable to live with.

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you *angry*? Anger can be a positive thing, but only if it is channeled toward constructive change and gives us energy instead of hatred. We can eventually move beyond that too.

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you *free*. I truly believe that would be the best thing for all of us.

To become more *free* because of the truth.

To become more *honest* because of the truth.

To become more *responsible* because of the truth.

To become *better neighbors* because of the truth.

To become more *productive and contributing citizens* because of the truth.

To become *better Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, people of other faiths, or people of conscience with no religion*—all better because of the truth.

To become a *better and freer country for all of us* because of the truth.

And a big issue for me, as the father of two teenage boys, is how we can all become *better parents who are more supportive of other parents* because of the truth.

Finally, to *become better and freer human beings* because of the truth. I think that's what Jesus was getting at in the Gospel passage.

We can no longer be afraid of the truth about race in this country—past, present, and future—because our fears will keep us captive to all kinds of untruths.

This book is about how to find the truth together in these difficult, challenging, and complicated matters of race in America.

We will try to answer the question Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. named in the title of his last book, released just months before we lost him: *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* A new generation will answer that question for a new time.

I crossed the famous Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on the fiftieth anniversary of the historic march that helped bring voting rights

to all our fellow citizens. It was then I realized that the answers to these questions will be found in crossing another bridge—the bridge to a new America that will soon be a majority of minorities. This book seeks to describe that new bridge and how we and our children can cross it together.

We need to better understand the past so we can cross the bridge to a new, freer American future where our growing diversity is experienced as a great benefit and not as a great threat. I hope you will take this book as an invitation—to explore the truth of America’s racial past, present, and hopeful future so that, yes, together, we might all become more free, our congregations more faithful, and the state of our union “more perfect.”

You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

# 1 | Race Is a Story

Race is about the American story, and about each of our own stories. Overcoming racism is more than an issue or a cause—it is also a story, which can be part of each of our stories, too. The story about race that was embedded into America at the founding of our nation was a lie; it is time to change that story and discover a new one.

Understanding our own stories about race, and talking about them to one another, is absolutely essential if we are to become part of the larger pilgrimage to defeat racism in America. It is also a biblical story, and now a global story in which we play a central role. We all start with our own stories about race, so I will begin with mine.

## My Story

Fifty years ago I was a teenager in Detroit. I took a job as a janitor at the Detroit Edison Company to earn money for college. There I met a young man named Butch who was also on the janitorial staff. But his money was going to support his family, because his father had died. We became friends. I was a young white man, and Butch was a young black man, and the more we talked, the more we wanted to keep talking.

When the company's elevator operators were off, Butch and I would often be the fill-ins. When you operated elevators, the law required you to

take breaks in the morning and in the afternoon. On my breaks, I'd go into Butch's elevator to ride up and down and talk with him. On his breaks, Butch came to ride and talk with me. Those conversations changed the way I saw Detroit, my country, and my life. Butch and I had both grown up in Detroit, but I began to realize that we had lived in two different countries—in the same city.

When Butch invited me to come to his home one night for dinner and meet his family, I said yes without even thinking about it. In the 1960s, whites from the suburbs, like me, didn't travel at night into the city, where the African Americans lived. I had to get directions from Butch. When I arrived, his younger siblings quickly jumped into my lap with big smiles on their faces, but the older ones hung back and looked at me more suspiciously. Later, I understood that the longer blacks lived in Detroit, the more negative experiences they had with white people.

Butch was very political, and even becoming militant—he always carried a book he was reading, such as Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, stuffed into the back pocket of his khaki janitor's uniform—but his mom certainly wasn't. She was much like my own mother, focused on her kids and worried that her son's ideas would get him into trouble.

As we talked through the evening about life in Detroit, Butch's mom told me about the experiences all the men in her family—her father, her brothers, her husband, and her sons—had with the Detroit police. Then she said something I will never forget as long as I live. “So I tell all of my children,” she said, “if you are ever lost and can't find your way back home, and you see a policeman, quickly duck behind a building or down a stairwell. When the policeman is gone, come out and find your own way back home.” As Butch's mother said that to me, my own mother's words rang in my head. My mom told all of her five kids, “If you are ever lost and can't find your way home, look for a policeman. The policeman is your friend. He will take care of you and bring you safely home.” Butch and I were becoming friends. And I remember his mother's advice to her children as vividly today as I heard those words fifty years ago.

Five decades ago, revelations about race in my hometown turned my life upside down—and turned me in a different direction. Encounters with black Detroit set me on a new path, on which I am still walking. My own white church ignored and denied the problem of race. People there didn't want to talk about the questions that were coming up in my head

and heart—questions that suggested something very big was wrong about my city and my country.

As a teenager, I was listening to my city, reading the newspapers, having conversations with people. I wondered why life in black Detroit seemed so different from life in the white Detroit suburbs. I didn't know any hungry people or dads without jobs, and I didn't have any family members who had ever been in jail. Why were all these things happening in the city? Weren't there black churches in the city too? Why had we never visited them or had them come to visit us? Who was this minister in the south named King, and what was he up to? Nobody in my white world wanted to talk about it—any of it.

All of this drew me into the city to find answers to questions that nobody wanted to talk about at home. When I got my driver's license at age sixteen, I would drive into the city and just walk around, looking and learning. I took jobs in downtown Detroit, working side by side with black men, and I tried to listen to them. That's how I met Butch and many young men like him who had grown up in an entirely different city from me—just a few miles away.

In Detroit, I found the answers I was looking for, and I made new friends. I also met the black churches, which warmly took in a young white boy with so many questions and patiently explained the answers. When I came back to my white church with new ideas, new friends, and more questions, the response was painfully clear. An elder in my white church said to me one night, "Son, you've got to understand: Christianity has nothing to do with racism; that's political, and our faith is personal."

That conversation had a dramatic effect on me; it was a real conversion experience, but one that took me out of the church. That was the night that I left the church I had been raised in and the faith that had raised me—left it in my head and my heart. And my church was glad to see me go.

During my student years I joined the civil rights and antiwar movements of my generation and left faith behind. But that conversation with the church elder was indeed "converting," because it led me to the people who would later bring me back to my Christian faith—"the least of these" whom Jesus talks about in Matthew 25, which would ultimately become my conversion text.

How we treat the poorest and most vulnerable, Jesus instructs us in that Gospel passage, is how we treat *him*: "Just as you did it to one of the

least of these . . . you did it to me” (v. 40). My white church had missed that fundamental gospel message and, in doing so, had missed where to find the Jesus it talked so much about. My church, like so many white churches, talked about Jesus all the time, but its isolated social and racial geography kept it from really knowing him.

At the same time, black churches were leading our nation to a new place. Their more holistic vision of the gospel was transforming my understanding of faith, and my relationship to the churches was forever changed.

I had to leave my white home church to finally discover Christ himself and come back to my faith. In doing so, I discovered something that has shaped the rest of my life: I have always learned the most about the world by going to places I was never supposed to be and being with people I was never supposed to meet. What I discovered by driving from the white suburbs to the city of Detroit every day, and going into neighborhoods and homes like Butch’s, were some truths about America that the majority culture didn’t want to talk about—truths that are always more clearly seen from the bottom of a society than from the top. This different perspective continues to change me, and Matthew 25 continues to be my conversion passage.

As a teenager, I didn’t have the words to explain what happened to me that night with my church elder, but I found them later: God is always personal, but never private. Trying to understand the public meaning of faith has been my vocation ever since. How that personal and public gospel can overcome the remaining agendas of racism in America is the subject of this book.

### **Much Has Changed, but Much Still Hasn’t**

A half century later, much has changed. Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and the black churches of America led a civil rights movement that changed the country and impacted the world. The historic Civil Rights Act passed in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Black elected officials moved into office around the country for the first time since Reconstruction. And Barack Obama was elected the first black president of the United States and reelected four years later. African Americans have achieved much in every area of American society, from law and medicine to business and labor, from education and civil service to entertainment, sports, and,

always, religion and human rights. A new generation, of all races, is more ready for a diverse American society than any generation has ever been.

But much still hasn't changed. Too many African Americans have been left behind without good education, jobs, homes, and families—and these factors are all connected. Perhaps most visibly and dramatically, the treatment of black men by police and a still-racialized criminal justice system in America became a painful and controversial national issue over the last few years, making visible what has been true for decades. The cases of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida; Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; Eric Garner in New York; Tamir Rice in Cleveland; and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, along with countless other black men whose names didn't receive national attention, have provoked a raw and angry racial debate in our nation. As I finish the final edits on this book, yet another story has drawn national attention, this time involving a young black woman named Sandra Bland, who was on her way to take a new job at Prairie View A&M University, her alma mater in Texas, until she was arrested in a routine traffic stop and died three days later in police custody.<sup>1</sup>

The facts in specific cases are often in great dispute. But the reality that young black men and women are treated *differently* than are young white men and women by our law enforcement system is beyond dispute. A half century after my relationship with my friend Butch's family, there is still not equal treatment under the law for black and white Americans. And that is the great moral and religious failure we must now address.

I feel a deep sadness at recent revelations that show how deep our racial divides still go. The stories of young black men, in particular, are still so different from the stories of my young white sons. As a dad who is also a person of faith, I believe that is an unacceptable wrong it is time to right. That's also why I wrote this book.

## The Talk

All the black parents I have ever spoken to have had “the talk” with their sons and daughters. “The talk” is a conversation about how to behave and

1. Mitch Smith, “At Sandra Bland Funeral, Mourning a Life Cut Short in Texas,” *New York Times*, July 25, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/us/sandra-bland-funeral-texas.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/us/sandra-bland-funeral-texas.html?_r=0).



not to behave with police—"Keep your hands open and out in front of you, don't make any sudden movements, shut your mouth, be respectful, say 'sir,'" as my friend and regular cab driver, Chester Spencer, said he told his son. "The talk" is about what to do and say (and what *not* to do and say) when you find yourself in the presence of a police officer with a gun.

White parents don't have to have this talk with their kids. That's a radical difference between the experiences of black and white parents in America. Why do we continue to accept that?

As a Little League baseball coach, I know that all the parents of the black kids I have coached have had the talk, while none of the white parents have had such conversations with their children. And most white parents don't have a clue about those talks between their children's black teammates and their parents.

It's important now that we white people begin to understand "the talk." Even white couples who have adopted black sons and daughters have that same conversation with their kids. As a white dad, that is a talk I don't need to have with my two white sons, Luke and Jack, who are now ages sixteen and twelve. The fact that most white parents don't know that this talk is even occurring is a big problem.

Not being able to trust the law enforcement in your community—especially in relationship to your own children—is a terrible burden to bear. The stark difference in the way young black men and women are treated by police and our criminal justice system compared to white children is a deeply personal and undeniable structural issue for every black family in American society. For many white Americans, the tragic deaths of young black men at the hands of white police officers are "unfortunate incidents" that can be explained away. But for most black families, they are indicative of systems they have lived with their entire lives. Therein lies the fundamental difference: a radical contrast in experience and, therefore, perspective.

If the mistreatment of young black men by law enforcement officials is true, if black lives are worth less in our criminal justice system than white lives are, then this is a fundamental and unacceptable wrong that it is time to correct. I know it is true. The overwhelming evidence on the operations of our criminal justice system proves it is true, even beyond the individual facts of particular cases.

*Believing* that black experience is different from white experience is the beginning of changing white attitudes and perspectives. How can we get

to real justice if white people don't hear, understand, and, finally, believe the real-life experience of black people? Families have to listen to other families. If white children were treated in the ways that black children are, it would not be acceptable to white parents; so the mistreatment of black children must also become unacceptable to those of us who are white dads and moms.

The old talk is still necessary—and it's time to start talking together. If we do, I believe we can change the underlying patterns of personal and social prejudice that hold up the larger structural injustices in our society.

### **Building Racial Bridges**

The best way to change that *old talk* that black parents have with their children is to start a *new talk* between white and black parents. These conversations will make people uncomfortable, and they should. White parents should ask their black friends who are parents whether they have had “the talk” with their children. What did they say? What did their children say? How did it feel for them to have that conversation with their children? What's it like not to be able to trust law enforcement in your own community?

Pay attention, read, listen. If you are white and have African American colleagues at work or friends at your church, ask them to talk with you about this, to tell you their stories—then listen. If you don't have any black people or other people of color in your church, it's time to ask why. Reach out, and ask your pastor to reach out, to black and Latino churches in your community. We must find safe and authentic ways to hear one another's stories across the racial boundaries that insulate and separate us from others. Reach out sensitively to black parents at your children's schools. Ask to hear their stories. Talk to the black parents of your children's teammates if they play a sport. Or maybe it's time to realize that not having children of color at your children's school or on their teams is a big part of the problem. Parents talking to parents and hearing one another's stories may be one of the most important ways of moving forward in the church and in the nation. But white Americans must also take responsibility for their self-education and preparation before these talks so as to not put the whole burden of their learning on their colleagues and friends of color.

White people need to stop talking so much—stop defending the systems that protect and serve us and stop saying, “I’m not a racist.” If white people turn a blind eye to systems that are racially biased, we can’t be absolved from the sin of racism. Listen to the people the criminal justice system fails to serve and protect; try to see the world as they do. Loving our neighbors means identifying with their suffering, meeting them in it, and working together to change it. And, for those of us who are parents, loving our neighbors means loving other people’s kids as much as we love our own.

### **Racism as a Faith Issue**

To put this in a religious context: overcoming the divisions of race has been central to the church since its beginning, and the dynamic diversity of the body of Christ is one of the most powerful forces in the global church. Our Christian faith stands fundamentally opposed to racism in all its forms, which contradict the good news of the gospel. The ultimate answer to the question of race is our identity as children of God, which we so easily forget applies to all of us. And the political and economic problems of race are ultimately rooted in a theological problem. The churches have too often “baptized” us into our racial divisions, instead of understanding how our authentic baptism unites us above and beyond our racial identities.

Do we believe what we say about the unity of “the body of Christ” or not? The New Testament speaks of the church as one body with many members.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. . . . For the body does not consist of one member but of many. . . . As it is, there are many parts, yet one body . . . that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Cor. 12:12, 14, 20, 25–26 RSV)

Another version of 1 Corinthians 12:26 reads, “If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts share its suffering” (GW). What would it mean to share in the suffering of our brothers and sisters of color who are subjected to a racialized criminal justice system? So let’s be honest. As I said in the introduction to this book, if white Christians in America were ready to

act more Christian than white when it comes to race, black parents would be less fearful for their children.

Racial healing is a commitment at the heart of the gospel. If we say we belong to Christ, that mission of reconciliation is ours too. What does racial healing and reconciliation mean in the face of America's racial divide over policing and the criminal justice system? Churches, in particular, can offer leadership in navigating us through these difficult issues.

### The American Pilgrimage

The United States has the most racial diversity of any country in the world. This diversity is essential to our greatness, but it has also given us a history of tension and conflict. It has always been the resolving and, ultimately, the reconciling of those tensions that makes us “a more perfect union.” However, that cannot happen when we ignore, deny, or suppress our racial history and journey; it can occur only when we talk about it, engage it, embrace it, and be ready to be transformed by it.

Ironically and tragically, American diversity began with acts of violent racial oppression that I am calling “America's original sin”—the theft of land from Indigenous people who were either killed or removed and the enslavement of millions of Africans who became America's greatest economic resource—in building a new nation. The theft of land and the violent exploitation of labor were embedded in America's origins. Later immigration of other racial minorities was also driven—at least in part—by the need for more cheap labor. Therefore, our original racial diversity was a product of appalling human oppression based on greed. Many people have come to America, involuntarily in chains or voluntarily in the hope of a better life. And our great diversity is the key to our brightest and most transforming future. Indeed, it has already been one of America's greatest contributions to the world.

I believe that most police are good cops, but it would take more than a few “bad apples” to produce all the stories that *almost every black person in America* has about their experience with the police. Those stories are about a system, a culture, old structures and habits, and continuing racial prejudice, and how the universal but complex relationship between poverty and crime is made worse by racism. All of that can and must change with

reforms that begin with better training and transparency and more independent prosecution in incidents of lethal police violence—and end with making police more relational and accountable to the diverse communities they serve.

But underneath the flaws and injustices of the criminal justice system is our unfinished business of challenging and ending racism, an agenda that is not finished and never will be. We are not now, nor will we ever be, a “postracial” society. We are instead a society on a journey toward embracing our ever-greater and richer diversity, which is the American story. The path forward is the constant renewal of our nation’s ideal of the equality of all our citizens under the law—which makes the American promise so compelling, even though it is still so far from being fulfilled.

Our highest and most inspirational points as a nation have been when we have overcome our racial prejudices; our lowest and ugliest points have been when we have succumbed to them. In 2013, *Time* magazine did a cover story on the fiftieth anniversary of the “I Have a Dream” speech. In it, *Time* rightly said that Martin Luther King Jr. is now understood to be a “father” of our nation because he helped shape its course as much as the founding fathers did.<sup>2</sup> King and the movement he led opened a new door of opportunity for the future of America. But as we are becoming, for the first time, a country with no single racial majority—having been from our beginnings a white-majority nation—we stand at another door, which many white Americans are still very fearful of passing through. In this book I call that the *bridge* to a new America, and we will explore how to cross it together.

Race is woven throughout the American story and each of our own stories. All of our stories can help to change the racial story of America. I hope you will join me in this hard but critical—and ultimately transforming—conversation. Only by telling the truth about our history and genuinely repenting of its sins, which still linger, can we find the true road to justice and reconciliation. That is the premise and promise of this book.

2. Jon Meacham, “Founding Father: Martin Luther King Jr., Architect of the 21st Century,” *Time*, August 26, 2013, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2149610,00.html>.