

## The Gospel for Eddie & Tom

Ken Wilson, Easter 2018

Faith comes in **fits & starts** for most people—if you're not stuck in a rut, grows with you.

In college, I had a two-phase conversion. First phase: read gospel Matthew, found Jesus such a compelling figure I signed up to follow and discover the God Jesus knew.

As I hung around Christians I got impression I was supposed to believe my sins were so bad, God couldn't forgive without the bloody sacrifice of his Son, so they must be worse than I thought. It didn't make sense, but I thought, "**Maybe I'm not getting it**" You know how as a young person you worry about getting things right?...I had a lot of concern about getting my Christianity right.

Tell my story to a group of Pentecostals from India at a Faith Home in Brooklyn. 2 Rules: married pastors celibate; no medicine allowed. [Heartburn after hot curry] What did I know? maybe 20.

Featured speaker to give my testimony to this group. Setting scene: atheist in hs, smoke a little marijuana, after hs, surprise pregnancy, got married. They were aghast. I had a strange reaction to their shock: wow! I have a better story than I thought!...like checking a box on my getting-saved resume.

Over years, first phase (moved by Jesus, want to follow) always seemed fruitful, real, sustaining...what happened in Brooklyn seems more like something that might happen at a youth camp, with a lot group dynamic at play. Maybe some of you can relate.

I saw so many people in religious settings that were so hard on themselves and others, and there was nothing liberating about it. Almost seemed like a form of **socially-induced OCD**.

People already deal with feeling **inadequate**, something vaguely wrong with them, and this approach to conversion makes it worse.

We also know that oppression fosters a culture that dehumanizes, shames, guilts its subjects—to justify oppression.

Jesus never preached "let-me-convince-you-how-bad-you-all-are" sermons to his oppressed audience. He **exalted** or lifted up **lowly**.

The oppression I see now is often **intensified** not **relieved** by a certain religious approach. Especially for those: 1. Growing up LGBTQ. 2. Enduring overt-covert racism as a POC. 3. Female.

The way religion is used to make these forms of oppression worse is **antithetical** to Jesus and to his message. **How so?**

Jesus lived entire life under a cloud of **moral suspicion**. Widely known that Joseph didn't sire him. So Jesus occupied a **social stigma status**, labeled a MAMZER (bastard). In that era, moral reputation of parents conferred on kids. Possible that Jesus was single because his Mamzer-status disqualified him for marriage.

To make it worse, Jesus hung out with tax-collectors, prostitutes, sinners, which added to his reputation as a morally loose person. Gospels report he was labeled a **glutton, drunkard** (party animal)

A bad reputation can kill you. Ask **Stephon Clark's family**--latest black family mourning son mistaken for a criminal and shot by police. Responding to report of someone smashing car windows, like **Dexter kids** smashing mailboxes. They come across Stephon (in his grandmother's back yard) and think they see gun in his hand. Feel threatened and 20 bullets later—8 that hit target, all in back. Another bad shooting. He had a **cell phone not a gun**.

Doesn't happen in a vacuum. 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment abolishing slavery 1865: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime* whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." Why add a thing about crime in an amendment banning slavery?

Naturally, led to propaganda campaign to criminalize being black: After Civil War, posters, plays, movies (Birth of a Nation) depicted black men as rapists of white women, worst criminals. President Wilson Birth of a Nation in WH., same year 24K KKK rallied in DC.

As a result, when people see a black man in certain neighborhoods with a cell phone, more likely to assume it's a gun and open fire.

Yes, a bad reputation can increase your chances of getting killed by the authorities...something Jesus found out.

This is why Jesus took such pains to lift up the lowly rather than add to their oppression by shaming, guilting, making them feel “something must be wrong with me to deserve this treatment”

**I place in evidence, four exhibits.**

EXIBIT 1: Jesus presents himself to be baptized by **John**, who responds, ***“I’m not worthy to untie your sandal!”*** Does Jesus respond, ***“Flesh and blood didn’t reveal this to you but my father in heaven?”*** No, he responds in effect: You’re worthy enough to fulfill all righteousness. Let’s do this.

EXIBIT 2: On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus stops at **Bethany** for semi-public banquet with his friends Lazarus, Mary, Martha. Mary, a single woman, takes a **pint of extremely expensive fragrant oil** and anoints his feet with it, wiping them with her hair. All of it socially shocking (reinforced his reputation as a morally loose person.) He lets it unfold, receives this sacrament from Mary, and defends her when she is criticized.

This is an enacted parable of worship, of what’s going on when we offer ourselves to God: Mary knew this perfume was precious; Jesus knew it; and the onlookers knew it—they criticized her because what she offered was precious.

When **Ramades** dedicated **Ahannah, Aryia, Rishi**, they know, God knows, we know these children are precious.

For those getting baptized or renewing baptism today, keep that picture in mind—this is what’s going on.

EXIBIT 3: Soon after, **Jesus takes Mary’s part and gives the disciples his part by washing feet** after supper (a slaves job). Peter objects, ***“Lord you will never wash my feet!”*** Jesus replies, ***“Unless I do, you can have no part in me.”*** Peter replies, ***“Well then wash it all my whole body!”*** And Jesus, ***“No, you’re clean already, just your feet from the dusty roads.”*** You’re clean already, not “You’re a horrible sinner, in fact you will soon betray me, but God anger toward you will be blunted by my bloody sacrifice.”

Not saying we haven't all sinned, don't need forgiveness. I'm saying there is a **way of spinning things** that can be **used against you** by oppressive powers that have nothing to do with Jesus.

EXIBIT 4: Immediately after foot-washing, Jesus uses a **completely new term** for Holy Spirit—*Defender of the Accused*. Not accuser of the guilty, defender of the accused. The purpose of Jesus is to defend us against accusation not add to it.

The Holy Spirit, Defender of the Accused, is juxtaposed against the bad spirit—the spirit that animate oppression, and these are **named** time & again in gospels as **satan** (Accuser) and diabolos-devil, which means slanderer (one who speaks against others)

To be oppressed is to be mired in the molasses of suspicion: You know if you're gay, bi, or trans—even as your rights are being reluctantly recognized there's always the “don't push us too fast, don't be selfish, it takes time for us to adjust, this is really hard on us. Why won't you consider our feelings? **That's the suspicion generated by oppression, animated by accusation-slander.**

If you're **black or brown**, you have to be extra-extra careful around the police, extra respectful: **The power of oppression is in accusation and slander that cause suspicion.**  
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If you're a **woman**, and another makes a pass, someone will suspect you came on to him. **Oppression always puts a greater burden of proof on the oppressed to demonstrate their innocence.**

As the gospel of John moves to climax, Jesus he does this dramatic thing naming Holy Spirit, Defender of the Accused (that term **holy** has been used against many of you, but *Holy* Spirit is also now Defender of the Accused)

But there's one more thing: the story ends, not with crucifixion (tool of Roman oppression to criminalize Jewish people, knowing that there was a Jewish proverb “cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree”)...no, crucifixion as an otherwise final verdict does not stand in light of resurrection. The point of resurrection isn't “Let's sell some Jesus bobble-heads, he's so great!” the point is **GOD DECLARES THE SCAPEGOATS WHO LIVE UNDER SUSPION, INNOCENT, NOT GUILTY, NOT EVEN A LITTLE.**

Old gay couple showed me this. I've mentioned them before, but some stories bear repeating (conversion of Saul told 3X in Acts)

At dinner with Eddie & Tom, a couple in Julia's church. Together many years, raised 2 grandchildren. Tom lost a leg to cancer, Eddie dotes over him. Live in a conservative area, Eddie said he didn't leave house during day for 3 years for fear of being found out.

I'm asking Tom his story, because he was raised strict Baptist.

Loved God, went to Bible college—heard sermon railing against homosexuality. Thinks, “I can't not be gay, I guess I can't be a Christian.” Decades later, returns to active faith at Julia's church.

Always curious about spiritual experience so I ask Tom, “What happened inside you that—despite your bad experience with faith—moved you to reconnect? He thinks long-hard, looks down.

Then he looks up as if confiding a secret, making a bold confession:

**“I guess it happened when I said to myself, “Tom, you're not so bad. You're not a bad person.”**

When he said that, scales fell off my eyes. Saw gospel in new light. That awareness “I'm not so bad” was work of Spirit, named by Jesus, *Defender of the Accused*. The Spirit sent by Jesus, whom God raised from the dead as a public declaration of his innocence and the innocence of the people Jesus claims, people like Tom.

Anyone who has lived under oppression of this sort—an oppression named by Jesus Satan (Accuser) and the Devil (slanderer)—is called to come under a **New Spirit**, Defender of the Accused, a **New Verdict**, declared by resurrection: INNOCENT, not guilty! And this, btw, is a portal *for all of us* into a **New Creation**.

**This is the gospel I want to name & celebrate today...**

in bread & wine of communion and in the waters of baptism  
with all of you,  
who have taught me so much about the meaning of Jesus