

If racism is America's original sin, we should embrace the theology of redemption

What theologians hear when politicians speak.



In this image from Senate Television video, Sen. Tim Scott, R-S.C., delivers the Republican response to President Joe Biden's speech to a joint session of Congress on April 28, 2021, in Washington. Scott used the theological terms "redemption" and "original sin" in relation to America's racial history. (Senate Television via AP)(Uncredited)

It's not unusual for American politics to use religious imagery, but lately politicians have gotten downright theological. Take, for instance, the Republican rebuttal to President Joe Biden's address to Congress on April 28. Sen. Tim Scott addressed America's recent reckoning over race by saying, "Original sin is never the end of the story. Not in our souls and not for our nation. The real story is always redemption."

Those terms — original sin and redemption — are freighted with theological meaning. When Scott uttered them, seminarians across the country perked up. Many, including my former classmates, probably nodded in agreement. But watching the pundits after the speeches convinced me that many TV newscasters didn't understand the doctrines associated with those terms or the strength of those metaphors for American justice.

Original sin and redemption are separate but related Christian doctrines. They have been affirmed by every Christian denomination since at least the fourth century. These are among the core tenets of Christianity with centuries of scholarship behind them, from Augustine of Hippo to Pope Francis. So what do they mean? And what do they have to do with America's race problem?

Simply put, original sin is the doctrine that all humans are born guilty. The word "original" here does not mean sin that is novel or unique. Nor does it mean the first sin in a sequence. Rather, this is the doctrine that points all the way back to the fall of humankind recorded in Genesis 3.

At the beginning of the biblical story, God created the world without sin — no violence, no scandal, no harassment and importantly, no racism. God called his creation "good." Perhaps the most pertinent description of Eden is found in the Hebrew word *shalom*. This was a world at peace where everything flourished.

But Genesis 3 is where conflict enters the biblical story. Sin disrupts God's good world. Theologian Cornelius Plantinga defines sin as the "vandalism of shalom." And that vandalism defaces everything about perfection. The fall of humankind is not a say-three-Hail-Marys-and-put-it-behind-you kind of thing. It's a pervasive and universal spoiling, one that will affect every person born into the fallen world thereafter. Every person save one, that is.

Christians believe that Jesus was born without this stain. (Catholics extend that to Mary as well.)

That means that each baby born today at Baylor hospital is stained with inherited sin even before he commits any volitional act. Humans don't become sinners the first time they break one of the Ten Commandments. They become sinners the first time they draw breath.

As you might imagine, the doctrine of original sin ruffles feathers. It doesn't seem fair, especially to those of us deeply formed by enlightenment and Western culture, that we should be judged for shameful acts committed by our forebears. But theology is not jurisprudence. In the former, guilt and innocence are not always determined on an individual level.

Now you can see why original sin is such a powerful metaphor for America's racial heritage. When people call racism America's original sin, they are not saying it was the first transgression committed in the New World. They are saying it's a systemic, besetting problem that has roots in our origin story and tendrils that reach modern day. This metaphor is an assertion that America's inherited racial story is inescapable.

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But, wisely, Scott's speech pointed out that original sin is not the final doctrine. There is a separate doctrine that ensures that we are not left to wallow in our broken systems. That is the doctrine of redemption.

In theological terms, redemption required the sacrifice of an innocent to redeem the guilty. For Christians, that is the meaning of grace. If thousands

of generations of war and oppression and betrayal and, yes, racism teach us anything, it's that we are incapable of escaping our condition on our own. We need a rescuer.

Again, this is orthodoxy — a doctrine that has been affirmed by Christians of all stripes since the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Romans.

But of course, redemption is a harder metaphor to actualize in public policy, not least because there is no innocent party to call on for sacrifice. And because redemption offered freely is a rescue, but redemption coerced by policy is oppression.

We can't be sure how, specifically, Scott envisions an American move toward redemption. But there are at least three truths that can inform a vision like his.

First, our journey toward redemption must begin with confession. We must be willing to acknowledge that we share this vandalized heritage. Every spiritual journey worth taking begins at the trailhead of humility. Here is where Scott's language invites us to begin. America is the most successful and freedom-promoting democratic experiment in history, but it has also been the willing host of oppression, slavery and discrimination. The legacy we've all inherited is muddled, stained.

It will do us no good to avoid this confession. Another of Jesus' disciples wrote, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." A move toward redemption means a move toward the truth about ourselves, our history, and our shared future.

Second, we have to acknowledge the progress we have made on this issue. This is a more fair and just nation than it was a few generations ago. People of color face more opportunity and hold more security than ever before in

American history.

That is not to say the work is done. In fact, Scott said as much, acknowledging, "I have experienced the pain of discrimination. I know what it feels like to be pulled over for no reason. To be followed around a store while I'm shopping." And later, "I know firsthand our healing is not finished." But it's not racist or insensitive to mark our progress. It's historically accurate and should be encouraging. Redemption is not about guilt trips.

Finally, a move toward redemption must leave us open to the possibility that our rescue might come in unexpected ways, from a source outside our preferred race, party or people group. If there is one truth affirmed by all of the Bible's redemption stories, it's that we are not the heroes of our own stories, and our myopic insistence on playing the starring role only turns our divine comedy into tragedy.

Now, all of this may be so much hot air if we don't accept the wisdom of these ancient doctrines. We might, as a nation, decide that paradigms like redemption and original sin no longer apply to us and set out to forge a new kind of reality apart from them. Some of my readers may think it best for politicians to leave theology alone. But as long as our leaders are going to use this language, I think it best if we understand the tradition from which it comes and the deeper meanings it carries.

For my part, I have done a little bit of theological study at a seminary right here in Dallas. I have done a little bit of ministry, teaching doctrines like these to the faithful at a North Texas church. And I have done a little bit of opinion journalism, trying, along with my colleagues on the editorial board, to point toward a more perfect union. And from all those experiences, I agree with Scott: We will never understand the story of our souls or our country apart from the corrupting influence of original sin. But vandalism is not the end of

our story. We may yet realize our calling and restore the *shalom* of our nation if we open ourselves to an unexpected redemption.