# A Classic TULIP Bouquet

# Service Plans Exploring Five Doctrinal Distinctives

SERIES FOR THE SEASON

MARY S. HULST

ist the five points of Calvinism," I asked the congregation one Sunday at the start of a service. "We often use the mnemonic TULIP to help us remember what they are, so let's work our way down the list, starting with T." "Total Depravity," came back loud and clear, but after that the sound level decreased noticeably with each successive point, and I could see that most of the noise was coming from those with a bit—or more—of gray around the temples. The response indicated clearly that our wonderful heritage of faith needs to be passed on to the generations coming up.

So starting that very morning, I presented the congregation with the classic TULIP bouquet— Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints—one per Sunday.

Some may think it a little risky to preach straight doctrine in this age of narrative preaching.



Some may think, "I could never do that here." But I found that people are longing to know their doctrinal distinctiveness in an age of "Generic Community Bible Church," and these five points of Calvinism are not only solid doctrine, but also solidly scriptural and surprisingly pastoral.

These teachings come from a treatise called the Canons of Dort, written by Calvinists in the Netherlands to counter the beliefs of Jacob Arminius and his followers. Arminius denied certain beliefs held by Calvinists, most notably that people were welcomed into heaven by God's election. Instead, the Arminians believed in the ability of humans to make the choice for heaven out of their own free will. The Canons of Dort were adopted at the Synod of Dort in 1618-19. (You can find them in the *Psalter Hymnal*, pp. 926-949, and online at www.crcna.org/ cr/crbe\_conf\_cd.htm.)



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The Canons of Dort are divided into five sections. Contrary to popular belief, however, they do not follow the TULIP acronym. An acronym of the order of the Canons would actually be ULTIP. But over the years, people realized that these five points were much easier to remember (and teach in catechism class) when rearranged—thus, TULIP.

Recently, Rev. Jim Oosterhouse has repotted TULIP as FAITH (Fallen humankind, Adopted by God, Intentional atonement, Transforming grace, Held by God). I have found his book very useful in discipling a new believer. Those who preach to new Christians or to those less familiar with TULIP may find Oosterhouse's contributions particularly helpful (see p. 24).

A word of warning—this is one of the most challenging series I have ever preached, as it forced me to study and understand Reformed theology at a deeper level than I had before. It also brought me face to face with its more baffling doctrines, such as election, reprobation, predestination, and the extent of God's sovereignty. To help me address these concerns, I relied on a few solid resources: the Canons themselves; Louis Berkhof's Systematic Theology, which is replete with Scripture references and clearly lays out both the challenges to these points and how to address them; Lesslie Newbigen's The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, which has a fine chapter on election; Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace, a collection of essays edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); and John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion.

#### WEEK ONE TOTAL DEPRAVITY

# **Opening of Worship**

We decided to focus on God's holiness as a way of centering the early part of our worship. "Holy, Holy, Holy" served as our opening hymn, and a prayer from Augustine (see box), whose theology was foundational for Calvin, was followed with "Lord, I Want to Be a Christian."

# Confession/Reconciliation/ Dedication to Holy Living

The movement from worshiping a holy God toward awareness of our own unholiness is a classic Reformed liturgical move, and one to which our congregation is accustomed. We considered various Lenten hymns, often reserved for their specific litur-

# **Opening Prayer**

O loving God, to turn away from you is to fall, to turn toward you is to rise, and to stand before you is to abide forever. Grant us, dear God, in all our duties your help; in all our uncertainties your guidance; in all our dangers your protection; and in all our sorrows your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

-Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

gical season, to use during the time of confession. The weight of those hymns, we discovered, can be even greater when presented at another time. The hymn was set off with a spoken and sung litany of confession (see box, p. 19).

#### **Scripture Lessons**

Genesis 3; Romans 5:6-6:14. (The Genesis 3 passage lends itself to a readers theater, although we did not present it in this way.)

#### **Sermon Notes**

- I began with an illustration of a frustrated teacher attempting to take charge of a noisy classroom by threatening to punish the whole class if a single student speaks out of turn. When that happens and all are punished, the rest protest: "It's not fair!"
- From there we moved to the protest all of us could make: "It was Adam who sinned; why are all of us punished? It's not fair!" Adam and Even uncorked an infection that spread through all of God's orderly world. Even the good we do is tainted: we volunteer to help out with a neighborhood Bible study not only because is it an investment in the neighborhood but also because it will look great on our résumé.
- Our depravity keeps us from maintaining the holiness we attempt—how many of us attempt to incorporate a new spiritual discipline into our lives and fail?
- Total depravity does not mean that we act as sinfully as we can all of the time. Nor that all of us engage in all forms of sin. Although all are depraved, we do not all manifest our depravity in the same ways or to the same degree. But none of us is better than another. When it comes to holiness, we don't compare ourselves to the guy at the end of the pew, we compare ourselves to God.

# We Are Reconciled to God

#### All sing:

Ah, holy Jesus, how have you offended, that mortal judgment has on you descended? By foes derided, by your own rejected, O most afflicted!

**Leader:** Did God create people so wicked and perverse?

People: No. God created them good and in his own image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that they might truly know God their creator, love him with all their heart, and live with him in eternal happiness for his praise and glory.

#### All sing:

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon you?

It is my treason, Lord, that has undone you. 'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied you; I crucified you.

**Leader:** Then where does this corrupt human nature come from?

People: From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise. This fall so poisoned our nature that we are born sinners—corrupt from conception on.

#### All sing:

For me, dear Jesus, was your incarnation, your mortal sorrow, and your life's oblation; your death of anguish and your bitter passion, for my salvation.

Leader: But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil?

People: Yes, unless we are born again, by the Spirit of God.

# All sing:

Therefore, dear Jesus, since I cannot pay you, I do adore you and will ever pray you, think on your pity and your love unswerving, not my deserving.

—From the hymn "Ah, Holy Jesus" (PsH 386) and Lord's Day 3, Heidelberg Catechism



- Because of our depravity, we can do nothing to get ourselves out of this mess and into God's good graces. Even our most righteous works are like filthy rags (Isa. 64:6). Unlike Catholics, who believe that our good works help us make up for actual sins; unlike Arminians, who believe that our free will enables us to choose God; we believe that sin makes us unable to choose God and unable to do anything that would earn our way into heaven. Sin doesn't just make us sick, it kills us (Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15).
- It would have been fair for God to leave us, to condemn Adam and Eve for all eternity. But God didn't. God cursed the serpent first. And in the cursing of the serpent, God promised that a Redeemer would come and depravity would be no more. Because of the work of Jesus, we are saved, we are forgiven, we are free. It's not fair. Thanks be to God!

Hymn of Response: "And Can It Be" PsH 267, RL 451, TH 455, TWC 473

Closing Hymn: "Holy, Holy, Holy" PSH 249, PH 138, RL 611, TH 100, TWC 2 (stanza 3)

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# WEEK TWO UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

#### **Opening of Worship**

"Great opening hymn choice today!" said a member as I walked into the sanctuary. "We used to call that the TULIP hymn." Indeed, "How Vast the Benefits Divine" (PsH 497, TH 470) hits all the high points of Reformed theology, and is especially clear on election, which is why we chose it for this Sunday. The words of the opening prayer were based on the New Testament lesson for the day (see box), and the song following the prayer, Psalm 136, "Love Is Never Ending" focuses on God's election of Israel, a theme highlighted in the Old Testament lesson. (We suggest singing all the stanzas, since the song moves quickly.)

# Opening Sentences Based on Ephesians 1:3

Leader: Grace and peace to you this day from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

People: Blessed be the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing.

Leader: Before the world was made, God chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless before him in love.

People: According to God's great pleasure, we are adopted as God's children, redeemed according to God's good pleasure.

Leader: In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.

All: For this reason we bow before the Father.

To him be glory in the church and in Christ
Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.

# Confession/Reconciliation/ Dedication to Holy Living

Election is fundamentally about the love of God for his children, and so our confession section used spoken and sung words to point out God's love for us (see box).

#### **Scripture Lessons**

Deuteronomy 10:12-22; Ephesians 1:3-14

#### **Sermon Notes**

In this sermon I did what I rarely do: I used three points and a poem.

• Election is biblical. Pointing to the biblical evidence for election (Matt. 22; John 6, 15; Acts 13:48; Rom. 8, 9, 11; 1 Thess. 1; 1 and 2 Peter)

# We Are Reconciled to God

Call to Confession

The proof of God's amazing love is this: While we were sinners Christ died for us. Because we have faith in him, we dare to approach God with confidence. In faith and penitence, let us confess our sin before God and one another.

Prayer of Confession

Righteous God, your mercy awaits us when we return to you in meekness and repentance. Cleanse us from selfishness and falseness, which separate us from your fellowship. Through your atoning love, heal the brokenness in our lives and in our world. With wholeness restored, help us live for the coming of your Son, our Savior, in whose name we pray. Amen.

—adapted from Arlene M. Mark, Mennonite Publishing House Bulletin, Scottsdale, Pennsylvania

Assurance of Pardon

Hear the good news!

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, that we might be dead to sin, and alive to all that is good. I declare to you in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

Amen.

Sung Response: "What Wondrous Love" PSH 379, PH 85, SFL 169, TH 261, TWC 212

and even to the work of theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas helps listeners avoid the common misperception that unconditional election was Calvin's own idea!

Election is baffling. An obvious point to make, but one that's very important pastorally. People may think that if they don't understand election, they are less pious, less trusting, less orthodox. Acknowledging that election is baffling frees people to speak of their hesitation to accept it.

I attempted to make it a little less so by talking about the power of God's spoken Word (an insight gleaned from Gordon Spykman's *Reformed Dogmatics*). God creates by speaking (Gen. 1). God's Word creates. And when God places Adam and Eve in the garden, he speaks a warning: if you eat of this tree, you shall surely die. When they fall into sin, God speaks a word of hope: the seed of the woman will crush the head of the

serpent. Both the word of death and the word of life are bound to be fulfilled. From this comes the doctrine of election, in which some are chosen for life and some are chosen for death.

Because we do not always do what we say, we are baffled by a God so bound by his word that he will do whatever it takes to fulfill it. Some, like Arminius, reject this doctrine. He proposed instead that God knew who was going to choose him, but that it was up to us to make the choice. But as we learned last week, we are unable to choose God because of our depravity.

Election is also baffling because it puts God at the center, as Paul makes clear in Romans 9. And our fallen natures resent that. Poet Chad Walsh gets at our bafflement in his poem "Two Gray Cats" (box).

How should we deal with this? Neither Paul nor Walsh nor Calvin, for that matter, ever really answers the question. Each gets to a certain point and then simply leaves it with God.

leave it at that, but our heads may be willing to leave it at that, but our hearts yearn to go a step further. Calvin saw election as a doctrine that provides deep comfort and assurance, and that is how the Canons of Dort presents it as well. For those who have accepted Jesus, there are no worries for eternity. Unconditional election is biblical, and it is baffling; but above all it is balm because it shows God's amazing love for his children. It shows us a God who does what he says he will do. It. It shows us a God who keeps promises, whose ways are not our ways, whose thoughts are not our thoughts. Unconditional election is about God. Blessed be God's name.

# Two Gray Cats

Two gray cats under a tree
I open the door and summon one
Both of them bound and run to me
Get away get away I tell one
And shove him off with the flat of shoe
I let the other gray cat through
I open a can, I find a dish
I feed his soul on tuna fish
The other cat can gnash his fangs
and scratch for scraps in the garbage can
Spare me your ethical harangues
Neither deserves to be my cat
I chose one and that is that.

—Chad Walsh, unpublished

*Hymn of Response:* "My Lord, I Did Not Choose You" PsH 496 (We paired this with the more familiar tune AURELIA.)

Closing Hymn: "Father, Long Before Creation"
P8H 464, RL 353

# WEEK THREE LIMITED ATONEMENT

## **Opening of Worship**

We used "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" to open our worship, another hymn that touches on total depravity ("prone to wander"), unconditional election ("Jesus sought me"), limited atonement ("bought me with his precious blood"), irresistible grace ("oh, to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be"), and perseverance of the saints ("bind my wandering heart to thee"). Our litany highlighted the theme of atonement, and Psalm 27, "The Lord Is My Light" (SFL 206) reminded us of God's care.

# **Opening Sentences**

Give thanks to God, for God is good.

When we were overwhelmed by sin, God atoned for our transgressions.

God lifted me from the pit of sin and set me safely on a rock.

God made me a new creation and gave me a new song to sing.

Thanks be to God for his priceless gift, even his Son, our Savior.

Give thanks to God, for God is good.

—from Arlene M. Mark, Words for Worship, Herald Press, 1996

# Confession/Reconciliation/ Dedication to Holy Living

We focused on Jesus as the atoning sacrifice for our sins, using "O Christ, the Lamb of God" (PsH 257) with intervening Scripture and a prayer (see box, p. 22).

#### **Scripture Lessons**

Isaiah 53; Hebrews 9:11-28

#### **Sermon Notes**

 In order to understand Atonement, it is helpful to look at Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. The sins of the people demanded sacrifice: "without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb. 9:22). This was powerfully displayed to the people of Israel in many ways throughout the year, and most graphically on Yom Kippur, when the people would fast and the animals would be slaughtered for the sins of the nation.

• When Jesus died as the lamb of God, it was to end the system of sacrifice and to pay the final price. I used Oosterhouse's concept of intentional atonement here, since calling this doctrine "limited" could imply that God is limited, or that the blood of Jesus can only go so far. "Intentional" allows us to see this doctrine as another example of God's sovereignty. God is intentional about those he saves, leaving nothing to chance. God will do everything that needs to be done in order to bring his children home, even allowing his Son to die.

# We Are Reconciled to God

Call to Confession

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. In humility and faith let us confess our sin to God.

**Sung Response:** "O Christ, the Lamb of God," women and girls, measures 1-6

Prayer of Confession

Eternal God, our judge and redeemer, we confess that we have tried to hide from you, for we have done wrong. We have lived for ourselves, and apart from you. We have turned from our neighbors, and refused to bear the burdens of others. We have ignored the pain of the world and passed by the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed. Through your atoning love, forgive our sins, and free us from selfishness, that we may choose your will and obey your commandments; through Jesus Christ our Savior.

**Sung Response:** "O Christ, the Lamb of God," men and boys, measures 7-12

Assurance of Pardon, based on Isaiah 53:6

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

**Sung Response:** "O Christ, the Lamb of God," all, measures 13-21

Hymn of Response: "No Weight of Gold or Silver"

Closing Hymn: "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" Psh 384, Ph 101, RL 293, SFL 166, Th 252, TWC 213

# WEEK FOUR IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

## **Opening of Worship**

For this Sunday, we used resources from our brothers and sisters in Africa, starting with "Come, All You People," arranged by John Bell (SNC 4). The two hymns were chosen for their focus on grace: "Amid the Thronging Worshipers" (PsH 239) and "Marvelous Grace of Our Loving Lord" (TWC 472).

# Opening Prayer

God of grace, you have given us minds to know you, hearts to love you, and voices to sing your praise. Fill us with your Spirit that we may celebrate your glory and worship you in spirit and in truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

# Confession/Reconciliation/ Dedication to Holy Living

"Mayenziwe/Your Will Be Done" (SNC 198) served as our sung response during the confession section, which also included a prayer by a Nigerian Christian (see box, p. 23). The choir sang the refrain the first time in Zulu, and then the congregation sang it the next two times in English.

#### **Scripture Lessons**

Genesis 12:1-9; Ephesians 2:1-10

#### **Sermon Notes**

Philip Yancey tells a C. S. Lewis story in his book What's So Amazing About Grace? Attendees at a conference on comparative religions in Britain were debating if there was any belief that was unique to Christianity among world religions. Incarnation? No, other religions had gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? No, other religions had people coming back to life. Lewis walked in. "What's the rumpus about?" he asked. When he heard what they were talking about, Lewis responded, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace." Christianity is the only religion in which all of the hard work has already been done.

Why aren't more people lining up to get into church? Maybe because they see that the people in

# We Are Reconciled to God

Call to Confession

Remember that our Lord Jesus can sympathize with us in our weaknesses, since in every respect he was tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with boldness approach the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor.

**Sung Response:** "Mayenziwe," sung in Zulu by the choir

Prayer of Confession

God in heaven, you have helped my life grow like a tree. Now something has happened. Satan, like a bird, has carried in one twig of his own choosing after another. Before I knew it, he had built a dwelling place and was living in it. Today, my Father, I am throwing out both the bird and the nest.

-The Oxford Book of Prayer, George Appleton, editor

**Sung Response:** "Mayenziwe," sung in English by congregation

Assurance of Pardon

Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old life has gone; a new life has begun. Know that you are forgiven and be at peace.

Amen.

Sung Response: "Mayenziwe," sung by congregation

Prayer of Dedication

Let the healing grace of your love, O Lord, so transform us that we may play our part in the transfiguration of the world from a place of suffering, death, and corruption to a realm of infinite light, joy, and love. Make us so obedient to your Spirit that our lives may become a living prayer and a witness to your unfailing presence.

church don't allow themselves to rest in God's grace. We imagine God with a red pen and a record book, waiting to give us a demerit if we slip up. In truth, God is in heaven overseeing the completion of our rooms, like a parent awaiting the birth of a child. God is eager to have us home with him. God says, "You are mine and I love you. There is nothing you have to do. You are my child, I call you by name, and I love you. I will wash away your sins and clothe you in righteousness. I will feed you from my

table and supply all your needs. I will be with you always, to the end of the age."

That's grace. God loves us. Not because of anything we have done, but because that is who God is. The One who loves. The One who chooses. The one who extends irresistible grace to his beloved children. Rest in God's love, rest in God's care, rest in God's grace.

Hymn of Response: "Amazing Grace" PsH 462, PH280, RL 456, SFL 209, TH 460, TWC 502

Offertory: "O Rest in the Lord," Mendelssohn

Closing Hymn: "Siyahamba/We Are Marching in the Light of God" SNC 293

# WEEK FIVE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

**Opening of Worship** 

We sang "O Worship the King" (PsH 428, PH 476, RL 2, TH 2, TWC 29), which focuses on God's sovereignty and God's care for his children. Our opening litany was based on Psalm 103, our psalm lesson for the day (see box).

# **Psalm of Entrance**

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. We come together to worship the God of creation, of salvation, of time and eternity; the God of all peoples, all nations, all people everywhere.

Praise the Lord! All that is within me, praise God's holy name.

Praise the Lord and remember all his kindness: in forgiving our sins; in curing our diseases; in saving us from destruction; in surrounding us with love.

The Lord is full of mercy and compassion. The Lord is slow to anger and generous in love. Praise the Lord! Oh, all that is within me, praise the Lord!

# Confession/Reconciliation/ Dedication to Holy Living

Our sung call to confession was "Come, You Sinners, Poor and Needy," which emphasizes God's activity in our salvation and our inactivity: "all that he requires as fitness is to know your need of him" (see box, p. 24).

#### **Scripture Lessons**

Psalm 103; Romans 12

#### **Sermon Notes**

Many biblical writers compare the Christian life to running a race. Does perseverance of the saints mean that we Christians need to persevere, to stay the course, to do everything we can to make it to the finish line? No. Instead it reflects our belief that God has chosen those who will finish this race, and that God the Holy Spirit comes alongside us as we run and ensures that we will finish.

In an interview aired on National Public Radio, an Iowa university professor described three important principles he teaches students in his course on marathon running:

- First, he teaches them to view themselves as marathoners. They aren't people who hope to run a marathon, they are marathoners. Similarly, God encourages us to view ourselves as God's holy children. If we view ourselves this way, we will be less likely to veer off course.
- Second, he teaches them accountability by having them train together. That principle is equally applicable to the Christian life. Running our best race happens in community. Our election in Christ was not just about us. God chose us with a purpose that we fulfill in community with other

- people. God's perseverance in getting us home includes working through us for the benefit of our fellow runners and using them to bless us.
- Finally, he teaches them to add the phrase "but it doesn't matter" at the end of every complaint about training. As in, "It's really cold out here today—but it doesn't matter." In this way students learn to focus on the goal. God's people need to be assured that, in light of the goal, our past mistakes and failures no longer matter. God forgives us and longs for us to follow in obedience and love. As far as the east is from the west, so far does God remove our transgressions from us. Nothing we have ever done can make us lose our salvation. Nothing we have ever done will make God give up on us.

The perseverance of the saints means that the Holy Spirit is always with us, even on the side roads. God will never leave us or forsake us. No matter what happens, we are children of God, placed in the communion of saints, washed in the blood of the lamb. No matter what happens, we are held by God forever.

Hymn of Response: "When Peace Like a River" PSH 489, TH 691, TWC 519

Closing Hymn: "For All the Saints" PSH 505, PH 526, RL 397, SFL 195, TH 358, TWC 751

# We Are Reconciled to God

Sung Call to Confession: "Come, You Sinners, Poor and Needy" PSH S34, TWC 451

Prayer of Confession

Eternal God, our judge and redeemer, we confess that we have tried to hide from you, for we have done wrong. We have lived for ourselves, and apart from you. We have turned from our neighbors, and refused to bear the burdens of others. We have ignored the pain of the world, and passed by the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed.

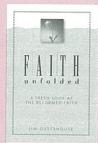
In your great mercy forgive our sins and free us from selfishness, that we may obey your commandments, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon:

Hear the good news! Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ, and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us. Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old life has gone; a new life is begun. Know that you are forgiven and be at peace.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

# F.A.I.T.H. Unfolded: A Fresh Look at the Reformed Faith



FAITH—Fallen humankind, Adopted by God, Intentional atonement, Transformed by the Holy Spirit, Held by God—is another way to spell TULIP.

This fresh look at the basic doctrines in the Reformed tradition was developed by James Oosterhouse,

a Christian Reformed pastor and current regional director for Christian Reformed Home Missions, to use for teaching member classes and discipling individuals.

Study guide (54 pp.) for classes and small groups #150930, \$4.95 $^{\text{US}}$ /\$7.20 $^{\text{CDN}}$ ; pamphlet for individuals #150935, \$.75 $^{\text{US}}$ /\$1.10 $^{\text{CDN}}$  (10 or more \$.60 $^{\text{US}}$ /\$.90 $^{\text{CDN}}$ ). Available from Faith Alive Christian Resources, 1-800-333-8300 or www.FaithAliveResources.org.