

# BANNER

## Reformed Basics

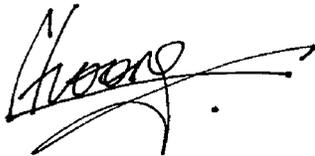
Greetings! I am pleased and excited to introduce our first title in the Banner Series: Reformed Basics. This digital collection of previously published *Banner* articles is a way for us to further serve our readers and churches. Providing this resource at no cost to you is another way we wish to say thank you for being faithful readers and supporters.

In this collection, we have compiled a series of Reformed Matters articles, plus one feature article, written for *The Banner* by Rev. Leonard Vander Zee. Len is a retired CRC pastor who served as the interim *Banner* editor for 2015-16 and was former editor-in-chief of Faith Alive Christian Resources. Our compilation includes articles on the doctrine of election, the Trinity, the Ten Commandments, and infant baptism.

We have included discussion questions for each of these articles to guide you in your reflections. You can use this resource in a variety of ways: for personal study or devotion, small group discussions, or for adult education church groups.

We pray that this resource will bless you and edify you in your spiritual walk with our Lord.

In Christ's Service,



Shiao Chong  
Editor-in-Chief, The Banner

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# The Good News about Election

Election portrays the ever-widening embrace of God's love.

SCOTT CRESSWELL/FICKR

**FOR MANY OF US**, the doctrine of election means that God has chosen a certain number of people to be saved—and, depending on how you interpret the Canons of Dort, a certain number of people to be damned.

In thinking about election, we tend to dwell on those passages that seem to portray election as God choosing individuals for salvation. Some, maybe even a few, are chosen, while others are not. And no one can complain because we all deserve damnation anyway. Is that all there is to the doctrine of election?

Some time ago I became familiar with the writings of the great British missionary and theologian Lesslie Newbigin. In his book *The Open Secret* on the theology of mission, he names election as the foundation of the mission of the church. How can that be? The doctrine of election seems to be a problem for the mission of the church rather than its foundation.

The trouble is that we tend to think about election mainly from the perspective of Romans 9-11. Many interpreters, from Augustine to Calvin, understood these chapters to be about the election of individuals and the church to salvation. But, as more recent interpreters point out, Paul's doctrine of election here has a wider reach with roots deep in the Old Testament.

It begins in Genesis 12 with God's call of Abraham and Sarah. Inexplicably, sovereignly, God chooses this barren couple. God's purpose is clear:

I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you . . .  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you (vv. 2-3).

Abraham was elect—that is, chosen by God to bear God's blessing to the whole wide world.

God then widens his purpose with the election of the people of Israel, Abraham's descendants. Out of all the people in the world, God chooses them to be his own royal priesthood and holy nation (Ex. 19:5, 6). But their election has the same goal as that of their father Abraham: to be a "light to the Gentiles" (Isa. 49:6).

Jesus Christ finally appears as the "new Israel," embodying the elect and holy people Israel failed to be. His purpose as the true Israel is to show God's love for the whole world. Jesus then chooses (elects) disciples and finally sends them out to "all the world" to make disciples of the nations (Matt. 28:19).

Every step of the way, God works by electing some with the purpose of reaching more. Election is the means of God's mission, which means that our own election is never meant to stop with us so we may be an exclusive group of elect people to enjoy God's favor. It's not about setting limits and building fences.

Election portrays the ever-widening embrace of God's love. Its purpose is always inclusive rather than exclusive. It's the way the sovereign God gets things done. God chooses

some so that they may bear the blessing of his love and salvation to the many.

It's a great encouragement not only to know we are elect, but to realize that God continues his electing love through us. When Paul speaks to Lydia about Christ, Scripture says, "the Lord opened her heart" (Acts 16:14). Through his electing love and by the witness of Paul, God called Lydia and eventually gathered his church in Philippi through her. God is way ahead of us in his gracious electing love.

By sovereign election, God is accomplishing his loving purpose to spread the blessing of his love to every corner of the world, to every tribe and tongue and nation. Or, as Paul concludes in his discussion of election in a doxology:

For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments,  
and his paths beyond tracing out!  
For from him and through him and for him  
are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.

(Rom. 11: 32-33, 36) ■



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## Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday is the first step on a yearly journey that leads to the glad trumpets of Easter.

**WHY ON EARTH** are we writing about Ash Wednesday in a column called “Reformed Matters?” This would have been unthinkable just 20 years ago.

Though I have no hard statistics on this, it’s apparent that an increasing number of Christian Reformed congregations—and Protestant churches in general—are instituting Ash Wednesday services in their observance of Lent. Why?

First, a little history about the observance itself. Ash Wednesday began to appear in the Western church around the 10th century to mark the beginning of Lent. Lent has its roots much farther back in the practices of fasting and repentance in preparation for Good Friday and Easter. This time of fasting and prayer imitates Jesus’ own 40-day fast in the wilderness. If you count forty days back from Easter—not including Sundays, which are never fasting days—you come back to Ash Wednesday.

The association of ashes with the fasting and repentance of Lent comes from the Bible itself. Wearing sackcloth and pouring ashes on oneself was a sign of repentance in the Old Testament. Remember Job’s words after he finally humbles himself before the Lord: “Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6).

So for centuries Christians have gathered on Ash Wednesday to begin Lent by receiving

the imposition of ashes on their foreheads in the shape of a cross.

The practice has never been regarded as a sacrament in any church. It has no scriptural institution, and God does not promise to confer grace through it. Roman Catholics and Anglicans call it a “sacramental” in that, like a sacrament, it uses common material to convey spiritual truth.

The typical Ash Wednesday service has some common elements: praying Psalm 52, David’s great psalm of repentance; a call to observe the season of Lent; and a brief guide to its observance. And, of course, the imposition of the ashes.

The ashes are imposed on people’s foreheads with these words: “Dust you are, and to dust you shall return”—words spoken by God to Adam after he had sinned in the garden of Eden.

In the last church I served, we began to observe Ash Wednesday as a kind of experiment, but it continues to this day. Typically, about half the congregation attended this midweek service. Most surprising of all was that it was particularly popular with children and youth.

In our church we began with a simple soup supper before moving to the sanctuary. The service, brief but solemn, was marked by prayers and hymns of repentance, a sermon, and the declaration of the beginning of the

season of Lent. It culminated in the imposition of ashes.

For me, giving and receiving the ashes is a deeply moving moment. After all, there are few times when we confront our helplessness, our feeble and fleeting human life, so starkly. But on Ash Wednesday someone speaks a stunning truth about ourselves and makes it stick with a black smear of ashes placed prominently on our foreheads.

Often, when a young child or even an infant came before me, I choked on the words “Dust you are, and to dust you shall return.” Yet this essential truth is undeniable. We are, all of us, weak and mortal, poor and needy, sinful and rebellious.

But even in that moment, hope emerges. Ash Wednesday is the first step on a yearly journey that leads to the glad trumpets of Easter. The ashes are smeared on in the shape of a cross. It is the sign of the One who bore our weak and sinful humanity, who faced our mortality, and triumphed over it in his cross and resurrection. ■



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## The Holy Trinity: The Community of Love at the Heart of Reality

Here's the truly amazing thing. We are invited to join in the dance!

**IT'S PROBABLY CRAZY** to try to say something meaningful about the Trinity in 600 words or less, but that's all you get in this column. I risk it because this is the big one; everything else we believe depends on it. Yet to most people the Trinity seems murky, mysterious, and mostly irrelevant to our everyday lives.

To begin with, get rid of all those sometimes silly examples of the Trinity you may have learned over the years—the diagrams and the analogies. They make us think the Trinity is a problem to be solved rather than a reality in which we are called to live.

Instead, let's start here: At the center of all reality, at the heart of the universe, there exists an eternal divine community of perfect love. The Bible calls this community the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There's a certain logic to trinitarian belief. The Bible says that God is love, but the only way God can be love is for God to be a community of divine persons. Love does not exist in a monad. God is that eternal community of love.

The nature of true love is not binding or limiting, but expansive. Love flows outward, it grows. Therefore, the creation of the universe is an overflow of love from that original divine community as it expands in love and delight to include beloved creatures.

Some of the early church fathers used a Greek word to describe the life and love of the Holy Trinity: *perichoresis*. It includes the ideas

of complete interpenetration, a kind of perfect, loving indwelling. Or it can mean a dance; the divine dance of perfect love for all eternity.

Having recognized this mystery in the Bible, the early church began to sort out some possible misunderstandings—what the Trinity is *not*. The Holy Trinity is not a chain of command; it's not an amorphous energy field of love; it's not three gods who get along really well like the Three Musketeers.

Each person of the Trinity is irreducibly and uniquely itself, distinct in three persons, and yet is perfectly united in being, love, and purpose. It is a true community of perfect love.

But here's the truly amazing thing. We are invited to join in the dance! It's not just that God is trinitarian—our salvation is trinitarian too.

In John's gospel, before his death Jesus prays to his Father, "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them, even as you have loved me" (John 17:22-23).

Jesus makes the astounding claim that the triune God's ultimate purpose is to include us in this eternal trinitarian dance of love. The Father sends the Son to be one of us. By faith and baptism we are included in his relationship with the Father. By the gift of the Holy Spirit, we cry, "Abba, Father!" We are in the Son, and

the Son is in the Father, and we come to share in this eternal community of love through the Holy Spirit.

Once you begin to grasp how central the Holy Trinity is to our faith, it shows up everywhere. It's the beating heart of worship. It's the dynamism of the sacraments. It's the backbone of our creeds, and it's the assurance of our prayers. The triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the original and eternal community of love out of which we were created, and this One Holy Trinity is our true and eternal home. ■



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# Whatever Happened to the Ten Commandments?

The Ten Commandments reveal the moral grain of the universe.

PHOTO BY PATRICK FORE/UNSPLASH

**MANY OLD-TIMERS** like me will remember when the Ten Commandments were read each Sunday in worship, usually before a confession of sin. Some churches still recite the commandments in worship, but many do not. Why is that?

To get at this question, it's best to step back and understand what the Ten Commandments mean for Christians—who, as Paul says, are “free from the law” (Rom. 8:2). John Calvin famously outlined three “uses” for the Ten Commandments. First, he said, the law is meant to point to our sinfulness by mirroring the perfect righteousness and holiness of God. Second, the law is meant to restrain evil. As Calvin put it, “by means of its fearful denunciations and the consequent dread of punishment, to curb those who, unless forced, have no regard for rectitude and justice.” And third, to reveal the path of freedom and holiness to those who desire to please God.

It's that third use of the law that is particularly relevant for our lives. When the law is read we sometimes miss the all-important opening line: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the land of slavery.” In other words, the whole Decalogue is an expression of the way *free* people live. It's not meant to restrict us or tie us down but to reveal

how things work best in God's world. Just as a woodworker needs to know the grain of the wood in order to bring out its strength and beauty, the commandments reveal the moral grain of the universe.

That's why the Ten Commandments are featured in the Heidelberg Catechism—and all other catechisms—as one of the essential things Christians need to know. And in the Heidelberg it comes under the rubric of thankfulness. It's the way we redeemed and liberated people show our thankfulness to God—by living in the freedom of God's children in the world God made. When Jesus was asked which was the greatest commandment he replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-38). He understood that the Ten Commandments boil down to two essential mandates: how we are to love God and how we are to love our neighbor.

All three uses of the law Calvin describes are important. But we keep coming back to them over and over again because they so vividly describe the kind of liberated and grateful life to which we are called. They tell us how to live wisely and well in God's world.

They help us answer the daily issues we face. What does the Sabbath mean for us in our 24/7 culture? What does not using God's name in vain mean in a day when “OMG” is a common messaging punctuation and when politicians and businesses use God's name to pump their own platform or brand? How do we honor our parents when they are wasting away with Alzheimer's? What does “you shall not murder” mean for capital punishment, or warfare, or gun control?

With all that in mind, it might not be a bad idea at all to recite these timeless commandments regularly in worship, especially after the confession of sin, as a way to describe the kind of life in which we love God and our neighbor. ■



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## Unoriginal Sin

Sin is an imposter.

**I DON'T BELIEVE IN ORIGINAL SIN.** In fact, I think sin is just about the most unoriginal thing in the world.

Now, before you start to write your protest letter to the editor, let me explain. I believe that all of us are sinners, and that our sinfulness is deeply engrained in our nature. We sin as soon as we can, and we continue to sin throughout our lives. Sin is, as the Canons of Dort explain, pervasive—it infects every area of human life.

My problem is with the term “original sin.” It gives sin much more substance than it deserves.

First, the Bible is clear that sin is not original to the creation. The original character of creation, including the creation of human beings, is blessedness. It was all very good, and everything was immersed in God’s blessing. We should rather speak of original blessing, original goodness, rather than original sin.

It’s important to remember that sin is a fall, and God’s work of salvation in Jesus Christ is a work of restoration. God is not making something brand new in redeeming humankind, as though true human righteousness is an oxymoron. As the Heidelberg Catechism says, “God created [humankind] 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 God in eternal happiness, to praise and glorify him” (Q&A 6).

Second, sin is unoriginal in its very nature. Sin is a parasite, it can only live off the good. Just as fruit flies need ripe, luscious fruit to exist, sin needs goodness. In his book *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*, Cornelius Plantinga writes, “Good is original, independent, and constructive; evil is derivative, dependent, and destructive. To be successful, evil needs what it hijacks from goodness.”

Lust is a perversion of love. Pride needs some accomplishment, some excellence to turn into self-aggrandizement. Greed refuses to gratefully accept the good things of life but instead demands to have it all. Even the devil is nothing but a fallen angel whose only power derives from what God originally gave.

By calling sin “original” we give away too much. God is the only original being in the universe, and what God made good are the only original things in the universe. Sin’s only power and purpose is to destroy, corrupt, and maliciously infect God’s good creation.

The term “original sin” also carries with it the implication that sin is somehow God’s fault, since only God can be credited with true originality. Sin always has the character of an invasion, and an invasion can only seek to displace or destroy goodness that is already there.

My purpose here is not to minimize the destructive power of sin and the appalling misery it has strewn across its storm-track throughout human history. Nor do I want to diminish the hold that sin has on our lives. Sin, while not original, is frighteningly real, and failing to recognize its subtle and sinister power in our lives will only allow it to thrive.

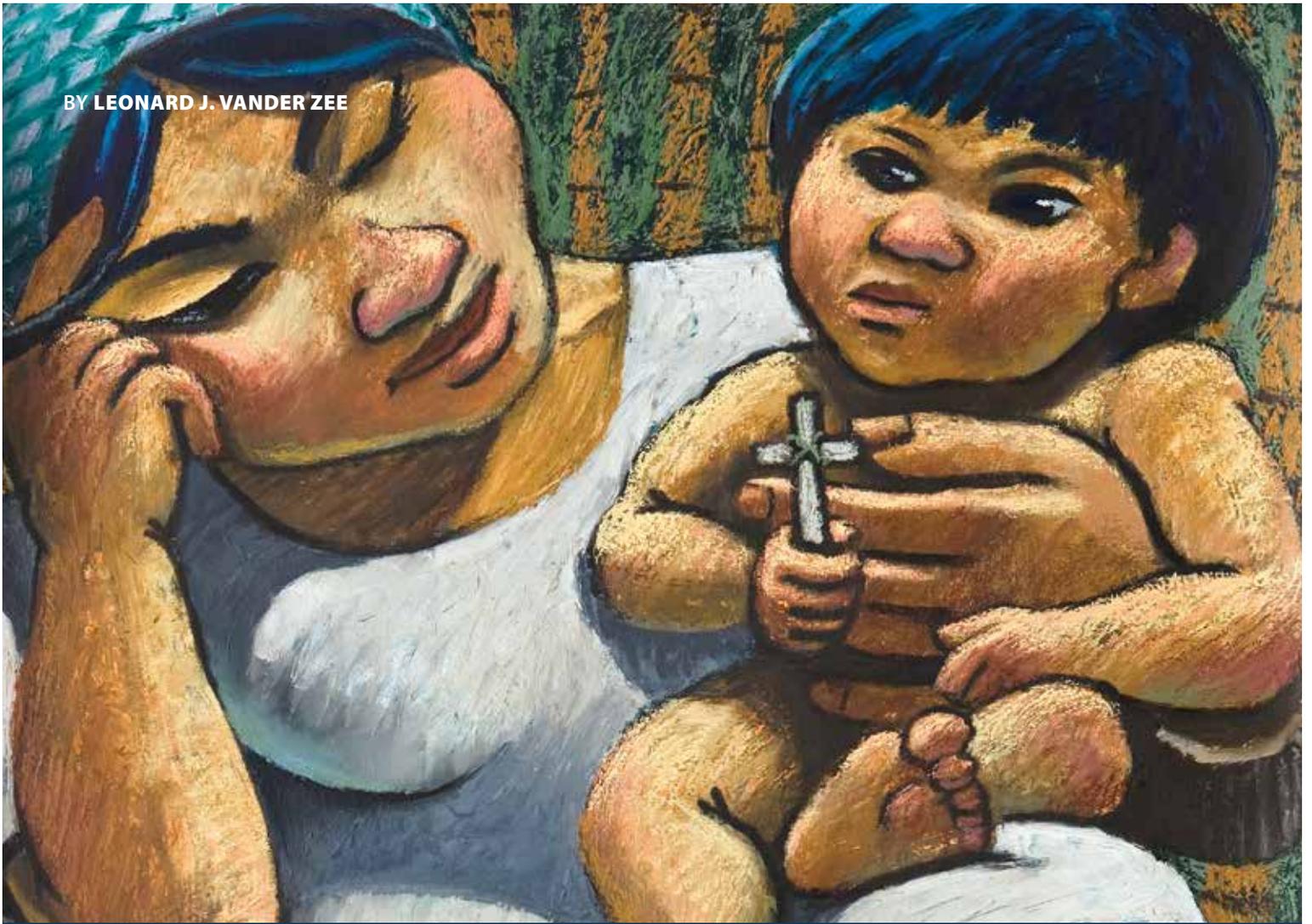
Rather, I want to magnify the incomparable greatness and goodness of God in creation and in God’s saving grace. The ugly parasite of sin is no match for the Creator God. In his resurrection, Jesus Christ destroyed the devil and all his works, making “a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col. 2:15).

Originality belongs to God alone. Sin is a fake, an impostor. The despotic empire of sin has been overthrown by the goodness of God in the self-giving love of Jesus Christ. And its emperor has no clothes. ■



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BY LEONARD J. VANDER ZEE



# OUR LADY TOO

**B**ECAUSE THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH has in some ways over-emphasized the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus, many Protestants tend to think of her as little more than a fixture in a crèche. Perhaps we should stop being concerned about thinking too much of her, but rather be concerned about thinking too *little* of this young Jewish girl who can teach us so much.

There is something very special about Mary, especially in Luke's gospel. Luke recounts more about Mary and her inner thoughts and feelings than do any of the other gospel writers. He places her at the epicenter of the incarnation.

Mary herself recognized her place among Christians: "From now on," she sings, "all generations will call me blessed." What is it about Mary that places her as preeminent among the saints, the foremost Christian?

Some might say that Mary's importance is that she was the mother of our Lord. That was indeed a privilege, as her cousin Elizabeth said: "But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" (Luke 1:43). But Mary's greatness is not merely tied to her motherhood, as important as that was for her and for all mothers. It is not merely Mary's biological role that is celebrated by the church.

Jesus himself destroys that notion. In a marvelous dialogue recorded in chapter 11 of Luke's gospel, a woman piously calls from the crowd to Jesus, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you." What a privilege to be Jesus' mother! But Jesus replies, "No, rather, blessed is that person who hears the word of God and keeps it." The miracle of Christmas and the blessedness of Mary is not merely a matter of her biological equipment. Mary's real importance was in her faith and courage, her humble servanthood.

In a Christmas sermon written 450 years ago, Martin Luther said that when Jesus was born at Bethlehem, three miracles occurred: God became human; a virgin conceived; and Mary believed. That Mary believed, said Luther, was the greatest of the Christmas miracles. All the rest could be done by God alone—but in this matter, God needed someone to say yes.

## MARY'S YES RINGS OUT ACROSS THE YEARS AS EXHIBIT A OF HUMAN FAITH.

For this young peasant girl in Galilee, that call comes with Gabriel's visit. Gabriel confronts Mary with an astounding, fearsome request. In the hundreds of paintings of the annunciation, Mary is often pictured as calm, receptive, demure. I imagine that she might have been amazed, fearful, and overwhelmed. Angel or not, this must have been a disturbing intrusion on Mary's life.

What if Mary had said instead, "No, thank you very much, but I'm not up to it right now. It's just too much to handle"? We tend to assume that Mary *had to* say yes; that God knew Mary would say yes, and that is why he sent Gabriel to her in the first place. Of course there's no way to know about this from God's side of things—we only know it from the human side. And from our side of the equation, Mary had a choice to make. Faith is not programmed into us by God's call. It involves a real response, a real choice.

Notice that Mary does not give an immediate assent, even to Gabriel. According to Luke, "Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be." And then Mary asks a question: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

Very early on, the church went on the wrong track about the virgin birth. People assumed that the virgin birth of Jesus Christ was necessary because of some assumed sordidness of sex.

But the virgin birth is not enshrined in our creeds because sex is distasteful to God. God invented it, after all. The point of the virgin birth is that self-assured, independent human action had to be excluded. If the Savior had been the child of two extraordinarily wonderful people, humanity could save itself. Instead, it had to be clear from the start that this was God's sovereign grace at work and not human self-improvement.

Only God can save us. Humanity cannot make itself worthy or lift itself by its own bootstraps into God's holy presence.

On the other hand, God will not force his way on humanity. God chooses instead to work through a human partner, a human gateway for his holy entrance.

Standing awestruck and afraid before the powerful form of an angel, Mary speaks for the whole community of faith throughout history, from beginning to end. "I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled." Mary believed in the impossible possibilities of God for the whole human race. Mary's yes rings out across the years as Exhibit A of human faith.

I remember talking to a young mother, a few weeks home from the hospital with her first infant. What astounded her, what she was really unprepared for, was the sheer loss of control. Once that baby came home, life revolved around feeding, diapering, sleeping, crying. She'd be lucky to remember whether she'd had a chance to shower that day. Her life was no longer

her own. For nine months, the baby had gradually been assuming more and more control, until finally it pushed its way out into the world. Now that control was almost complete, and it would continue for the rest of her life.

God seeks men and women who are willing to open their hearts to the seed of God's Word and the power of his Spirit—so that they can give birth to God's will and God's work in the world. Thomas Merton calls this the *point vierge*, or "virgin place." It's a place at the center of our souls that belongs only to God and that awakens only at his call.

In her book *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris writes, "I treasure this story [of Mary] because it forces me to ask: When the mystery of God's love breaks into my consciousness, do I run from it? Or am I virgin enough to respond from my deepest, truest self, and say something new, a 'yes' that will change me forever?"

In the Roman Catholic cathedral in Cuernavaca, Mexico, a large crucifix hangs over the altar as it should—Christ front and center. On the left, at the front, but clearly among the congregation, there stands a simple, modest icon of the Virgin Mary. She is not front and center. She stands among the people of God, and with them, her eyes are turned to the cross. That's where Mary belongs. She has a special place among God's people of all times and places as the one who believed the promise and gave herself to God's purposes. "I am the servant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your Word."

As someone once said, "It's good to be related to the son of God on his mother's side of the family." She is our Lady too. ■



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## Baptizing Babies

We baptize babies because God, in covenant love, claims our children as his own.

PHOTO BY PIXABAY.COM

### WHY DO WE BAPTIZE INFANTS?

In a way, that's a strange question. After all, infant baptism was the universal practice of the whole church until just the last few centuries. The two main Reformers, Luther and Calvin, vigorously defended it. But many Evangelical churches today say that baptism is only for believers.

We Reformed folks gladly baptize believers who come to faith in Christ, but we also baptize their infant children. We trace this practice back not only through church history, but, more important, to God's covenant with Abraham. God made a covenant with Abraham to make of him a great nation; through Abraham and his descendants, all the people of the world would be blessed.

The sign of that covenant was circumcision (Gen. 17). One of the important features of circumcision was that it was to be cut into the flesh of infant boys at eight days old. Children were included in the covenant of grace. God did not say to Abraham and Sarah, "I am making a covenant of grace with you, but we'll have to see about the kids." Instead God included their children and their children's children in that covenant.

Think of it this way. God made us as social beings, not just individuals. And

God chooses not only to work individual by individual but to work through the social networks of family and community God created. These circumcised children of the covenant learned from their earliest days that they belonged to God's covenant people. It was their identity.

To this, many of our Evangelical friends respond, "But that was the Old Covenant; we now live in the New Covenant. Now people must first come to faith in Christ and then be baptized. Isn't that what Peter said on Pentecost to that group of people from around the world who heard his stirring sermon? 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you,' (Acts 2:38). Faith and repentance must come before baptism."

But Peter didn't stop there. "For the promise"—that is, the covenant promise to Abraham—"is for you and for your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39). In saying that, Peter was being a good Jew. He understood that the Old Covenant was not set aside in Christ; it was fulfilled. God still works through the ties of family and community.

And on it goes. Three times, with the conversion and baptism of Cornelius, Lydia, and the Philippian jailer, the book of Acts tell us that these new believers were

baptized *and their entire households with them*. To say that those households didn't necessarily include infants misses the point. Peter and Paul baptized entire households because they understood that the operational principles of the covenant apply to baptism, just as it did with circumcision.

We baptize babies because God, in covenant love, claims our children as his own. We do not raise our children in the vague hope that someday they will be converted and then become Christians. We nurture them with the identity that they have already been claimed by God in their baptism in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. We don't tell our children who they *could be* if they only believe, but who they *are*.

Of course, baptism, whether as an infant or adult, does not guarantee salvation. It demands that we ourselves claim in faith the identity God gives us in our baptism. That's why we invite young people to publicly profess their faith. It's their personal affirmation of the identity they already have in their baptism. ■



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# Questions for Discussion

## The Good News about Election

1. What has been your understanding of election? Does it match the author's initial views? How is it the same/different?
2. How does the doctrine of election seem to "be a problem for the mission of the church"? (*Hint: if God has already predetermined the ultimate destination of every human being, then what is the point of evangelism?*)
3. How does God's election of Abraham and of Israel become a blessing for the whole world?
4. Discuss the claim that "Election portrays the ever-widening embrace of God's love. Its purpose is always inclusive rather than exclusive." Do you agree? Why or why not?
5. If God works out his mission for the world through election, what does that imply for those who are elect? What does it imply for us?
6. How did this article and your discussion help you to view election as something much deeper and grander than just a matter of eternal "innies" and "outies"? Does it make it easier for you to bring God the glory (Rom. 11:32f)?

## Ash Wednesday

1. If you have ever participated in an Ash Wednesday service, describe your experience and your reaction.
2. What is your reaction when you see someone on the street or at work with a smudge of ashes on his or her forehead?
3. The connection between sin and mortality is made in the Bible (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23). How do you experience this connection in your life?
4. What do you think about the participation of children in this service?
5. Ash Wednesday is a part of the larger practice of following the Christian liturgical year (Advent, Epiphany, Lent, and so on). What do you think of this practice? What benefits or problems do you see?
6. Why might an Ash Wednesday service be a good beginning for the season of Lent?

## The Holy Trinity: The Community of Love at the Heart of Reality

1. Is the Holy Trinity a meaningful and important element of your faith? Why or why not?
2. How is the image of the trinitarian dance helpful or unhelpful to you?
3. Salvation is described here as being enfolded into the life and communion of the Trinity. Discuss how that can be experienced in our lives today.
4. How is the Trinity the "heartbeat of worship," the "dynamism of the sacraments," and the "assurance of prayer"?

## Whatever Happened to the Ten Commandments?

1. How often does your church read the Ten Commandments? How do you feel about it being read or not read?
2. Which of the "three uses of the law" discussed in this article do you typically associate with the Ten Commandments?
3. How would you answer those sample questions near the end of the article about Sabbath, taking God's name in vain, honoring our parents, and murder?
4. What other contemporary applications of the Ten Commandments do you struggle with?

## Unoriginal Sin

1. What did you think of when you first heard or read the term "original sin"?
2. "Sin is a parasite, it can only live off the good." Besides lust, pride, and greed, as listed in the article, what other examples do you see in the world that show how sin corrupts what is good?
3. The article suggests that the term "original sin" implies that "sin is somehow God's fault." What examples, maybe even biblical ones, illustrate how we may have blamed God for evil?
4. Do you think the church, in its history, has focused more on sin than on God's goodness and grace? Why or why not? What are some examples?
5. How does knowing God has overthrown the "empire of sin" affect the daily reminders of sin's hold on our lives?

## Our Lady Too

1. How have you thought of Mary? What were you taught about her?
2. Mary's yes to God's call changed her life forever. Have you encountered similar thresholds in your life when God calls you to something that changes your life?
3. How is Mary's yes to God's call an example or inspiration for your own faith?
4. How do you think our churches can reclaim Mary as "our Lady too" without veering into any excesses?

## Baptizing Babies

1. Drawing from your most recent experience of baptism, what moments stood out as most memorable and meaningful to you? How did this experience point to the significance of your own baptism?
2. Prior to reading this article, how would you have answered the question, "Why do we baptize infants"?
3. What are some examples you can see of God working "through the social networks of family and community" in your life?
4. How would you describe the identity that God gave you in baptism? What hope, joy, or meaning do you gain from that?