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# Beyond Beginnings

by Jack Stotts

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Theology and Worship Ministry Unit  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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## **Preface**

The General Assembly's Ministry Unit on Theology and Worship is pleased to present to the church at large, and especially to those concerned for the renewal, integrity, and faithfulness of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), this second in a series of occasional papers.

There is no more urgent task now than that of renewing the church's worship and renewing the church's theological vocation. The unit is at work on a whole series of initiatives in partnership with church members and ministers, the church's theological institutions, and governing bodies, to encourage a revitalization of worship among us that is theologically based, historically informed, and sensitive to the needs of the people. In addition, we are seeking to develop resources that will encourage the renewal of Reformed piety and spirituality, and the recovery of Christian disciplines. Renewing the church's theological vocation is equally critical now. Theology is an expression of the church's calling to reflect on its faith and mission so that it may serve its Lord in more faithful obedience. Theology need not be abstract work that is divorced from the real life of the church. We trust this occasional paper will both evidence that conviction and contribute to our sense of the future to which we are being called.

Jack L. Stotts, President of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, and Chairman of the committee that wrote the "Brief Statement of Faith," has been one of the theologians among the people of God whose work in service to the church has become exceptionally important to many of us in recent days. His thoughtful reflections on our present context in the light of both the biblical faith and our ecclesial and cultural theological heritage have been sought by many groups in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), his sense of our desire to live beyond where we have been and are, into where we are called to be, his sense that "the ongoing trajectory of the gospel is toward the blessing of all the peoples of the world," his concern that we get a larger vision of what God is doing in order to more faithfully move into the future, has contributed substantively to the theological discourse emerging among us in many quarters now.

Dr. Stotts's address, "Beyond Beginnings," was given at a meeting of staff persons from various governing bodies across the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in April, 1989.

The Theology and Worship Ministry Unit's staff and elected members believe this address, reworked for this occasional paper, to be worthy of broader reflection and conversation across the church. We gratefully acknowledge Dr. Stotts's willingness to make it available to a wider audience.

As we continue to attempt to serve you here, we invite you to share with us any reflections you may have on this analysis, as well as any proposals you may have for ways in which this unit may make its own appropriate contribution with others as we move into the future.

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# **Beyond Beginnings**

Jack L. Stotts

## **Introduction**

Beginnings refers to the extraordinary range of denominational activities that have flowed from the beginning of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in June, 1983. The joy and exhilaration at the General Assembly in Atlanta that reunited the Presbyterian denomination provided motivation and spiritual energy for such extraordinarily significant but pedestrian, consequential tasks of adopting a logo and a design for mission, selecting a headquarters site and calling new staff, reordering governing body boundaries, and taking the initial steps in living two cultures into one. If reunion had not been theologically right—a partial recovery of the oneness of Christ's church—organizationally, it would have been hardly worth the effort and the personal costs.

The "Beyond" in "Beyond Beginnings" refers to the presumed crossing of a significant boundary. We now have completed most of the major assignments undertaken by virtue of adopting the Plan for Reunion. A few remain, the most substantial from my perspective being action on our confessional standards. But, organizationally, quite enough has been completed to allow ourselves a sigh of relief and a pat on the back, even as we inhale deeply and begin to move out of the necessary preoccupations with restructuring, relocating, and restaffing, and look toward future ministry.

A caveat to this "beyondness" may be in order. "When will reunion occur?" a friend inquired in 1983. "About 2023," I replied. And I still believe that full reunion will occur at the end of a time line that can have no set date. Extended time is necessary for organic communities to grow together, since the power of traditions in religious bodies is so great. Only the slow living into a common future with the consequent development of a single or dominant unifying identity, whose power replaces the force of earlier traditions, will suffice for the quality of unity we seek. But we are on the way.

### **Loss of Brand Loyalty**

Further, there is some appropriate candor required to acknowledge that, for the vast majority of Presbyterians, there is little sense of having lived through reunion, restructuring, and relocation. Those concerns are held and attended to by denominational officials and interested others for whom denominational matters at the national and regional governing body levels are properly and intensely important. But it is a sign of our times that we who are internally involved in such issues live in a culture that is characterized by what the sociologists call the loss of "brand loyalty." Religiously, that means the absence of *any* denominational loyalty in vast numbers of laypersons and many clergy. Not all have forsaken their loyalty, of course. There is a staunch loyalist minority. But the majority of church members, if we can believe the studies, identify solely with a local congregation and have no attachment to the ecclesiastical bodies beyond the local setting. This sense of belonging only locally is compounded by the multiplicity of religious backgrounds of Presbyterians. My experience supports the estimates that in a local congregation less than 50 percent of the active elders "grew up" Presbyterian and at least 60 percent of members have other than Presbyterian backgrounds.

There is no common denominational, ecclesiastical experience base that one can presume and on which one can build. Indeed, in such a culture, local leadership must attend to the pressing issue of creating a base of common experience, a local community. There is a local setting of differences that invites near-unanimous pastoral focus on providing a magnetic center to attract the separated and separating units.

### **Marginalization of Mainline Churches**

Two final elements of our cultural situation warrant notice. One is the increasing public marginalization of all mainline churches in the last twenty-five years. This is the loss of perceived power and influence, or access to levers of power and influence, in the realm of public affairs. This public "loss of place" has been accompanied by another factor: the intensification of interior affections as *the* presumed legitimate sphere for God's work and the church's address. The two together—privatization and subjectivity—unite to provide evidence for many observers that the church beyond the local, as an agent of public influence, power, and sig-

nificance, is vaporous, a distracting ghost of an earlier day. In such a "world," who wants or needs a denomination?

In such a society as the one caricatured above, continuing to invest enormous energies in restructure or reunion or new confessions may seem to be parallel to what Presbyterian Elder Mary Boney Sheets reminded some of us recently was the preoccupation of the Russian Orthodox Church as the 1917 Russian revolution broke out—namely, the proper color of vestments to be used during the church year.

However, given all of the above, impatience at the feeling of being bogged down in intra-institutional matters is a sign of realistic hope and a rumor of renaissance. I take it as a sign of a desire and intention to live beyond where we are into where we are called to be. This is not an unusual stance for Christians and the church. For the issue of "beyondness" is in one sense always the issue for theological reflection and church life, whether it be the question of the eschatological future that is coming to meet us, of the transcendent possibilities that come to us in the midst of every day, of death as a power and principality beyond our control, or of love that knows no bounds. As Christians, we traffic individually and corporately in beyondness.

### **The Analogical Imagination**

One way of dealing with beyondness is to welcome the imagination as an instrument for dealing with reality. Imagination is a way of seeing and projecting simultaneously what is and what is not yet, of going beyond what is to what may be, of organizing diffuse and seemingly divergent materials into a whole. It is also a way of projecting oneself differently into a similar or different set of circumstances.

One type of imagination that has reference to the past as well as the present and future is what Professor David Tracy calls the analogical imagination. Dr. Tracy observes that human beings understand themselves and others only through analogy. The word *like* is the effective term: "Oh yes, now I understand. Your experience was *like* the one I had when my daughter got married." Or, similarly, our experience is said to be *like* that of Rome just before the fall. Reflection and conversation may test the accuracy of that type of statement. But analogies align us with external experiences and relate us to them. An analogical imagination looks for

commonalities of experience in one's own and in others' lives to provide for both self-understanding (individually and corporately) and for understanding the other. Past, present, and future are merged in this imaginative act.

It takes a creative leap of the imagination to enter into another's experience or for another to enter one's own realm of experience. Yet, the analogical imagination can provide images or reference points for orienting our own and others' lives and situations. Its results give, as well, suggestions for living fruitfully in the here and now. Analogous experiences are not exact. They are *analogues—like* others. But they open up new vistas for seeing both ourselves and others. They contain a "surplus of meanings" that elude and transcend literal correspondence.<sup>1</sup>

For the next section of this paper, I invite you to join with me in this way of reflecting as it relates to scripture and to our life as a denomination. That is good Reformed practice, to begin with scripture and to relate it to one's own sense of who we are as church, to engage in a conversation with scripture, open to God's Spirit to inform and to instruct us. To find or to be found by biblical analogies is an ancient and revered form of hermeneutics, of interpreting both scripture and ourselves.

First, then, I hope in what follows to provoke your own analogical imaginations by inviting your reflection on appropriate biblical analogues for our current experience as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Second, I will choose a particular analogy and glance at how a doctrine of vocation relates to it. Third, I will attend to questions of structure in the light of the proposed analogy. This paper has, then, three parts:

- 1) The first is an exploration into appropriate biblical figures of speech or analogies for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
- 2) The second is an exploration of the doctrine of vocation within the context of the selected analogy.
- 3) The third is an examination of some structural implications for the biblical analogy.

### **Biblical Analogies**

If we understand ourselves operationally as Reformed Christians, we turn to scripture as an indispensable source of insight

and illumination for our lives as a corporate church, as well as for our lives as individuals. We discover in scripture, by the power of the Holy Spirit, images and figures that correspond to our sense of who we are and what we are to do.

These biblical images and analogies are multiple. The Bible is in one sense an anthology of analogies. In scripture there is a repertoire of analogies, of social realities that provide both descriptive and normative models for our life together. In fact, both theology and everyday church life live consciously out of such analogies, defined and described more or less adequately and with more or less accuracy. We remember that the alignment between *likenesses* is never exact. The criteria for a proper analogy is not exactness but

- 1) recognition,
- 2) suggestiveness,
- 3) power.

The question I want provocatively to pose for your consideration is: Where do we currently find ourselves as a church located in the biblical narratives? What are the scriptural analogies that are appropriate both sociologically (descriptively) and theologically (normatively) for our self-understanding and behavior, corporate and individual.

### **The Oppression/Liberation Analogy**

I will give two quick contemporary examples before making a proposal.

Many Christians who have thought out of the experience of social and political oppression in Latin America in the 1980s have found their sociological and theological analogues in the experiences of Israel in bondage and in its subsequent deliverance from Egypt. The core experience of the Hebrew people in the exodus period is a life marked by oppression. During that time the band of slaves in Egypt are led out of their stifling and repressive conditions by a God who frees a people—not individuals but a corporate body.

This biblical account of the experience of the oppressed/liberated people in the exodus and beyond resonates with the church of the poor and oppressed in Central and South America. With the help of that ancient story of desperate poverty and subjugation, that contemporary church identifies its own social location as one of oppression—religious, economic, and political. But they



also see in the story of the exodus a ground of hope. That hope is given shape and content by the agency of a religious community (the subcommunity of which Moses was the leader) that announces and gives content and force to the God who will and does free not only themselves but all the oppressed. These contemporary liberation Christians find in the pharaoh and his counselors what appears to be unshakable power. But they find in God a power over whom even pharaoh cannot prevail. And in Jesus of Nazareth they find a Messiah who delivers the poor, the oppressed, and the maligned into the realm of freedom. Theologically, their own movement is indeed often the opposite of that suggested above. They move from Jesus to exodus. But the theological tissue uniting the New and the Old Testaments is the model of Oppression/Liberation.<sup>2</sup>

In the biblical Oppression/Liberation message, today's oppressed people have found a model for understanding God, their own experience, and the meaning and role of the church. God is the liberator who intends and acts so that all people shall be free. The people are to respond to God's dynamic energies by appropriate actions of their own, forming their own lives and moving toward a promised land of freedom and justice. The church is a religious agent of religious, political, and economic freedom. For many Latin American Christians, this Oppression/Liberation analogue is proposed as appropriate descriptively of their own experience and theologically of God's purposes. It fits their experience of oppression and their hope for freedom. The experiences of the contemporary group are like the experiences of old. Such a fit releases and directs the church's energies toward education, witness, and engagement with their environment. It is a powerful model.

Yet, let me suggest, however tentatively, that this analogue is not apt for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Taken over from Latin America to the United States, the analogy lacks a fit. Our setting is not one of poverty and overt religious, political, and economic oppression. In our setting, the theology of liberation becomes at best a powerful theme of liberation. But its power to inform the full range of our personal and social realities is far less clear and therefore far less persuasive. The exodus story becomes for us *a* hermeneutic, not *the* hermeneutic, if we take the actual church into account. It becomes a claim not *about* ourselves, though it can be a claim *on* us. Or, and perhaps most often, in our individualistic society and subjectivizing religion, we individual-

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ize liberation, translating it often into self-realization or self-fulfillment, or freedom for the singular self.

There are exceptions to this absence of fit. For many women, the feminist experience finds power in the analogy of Oppression/Liberation. For them, the exodus experience and the experience of suffering/hope do unite to form a powerful analogy. This is also the case with racial ethnic groups. But in my judgment we as a denomination are not oppressed in any way genuinely analogous to the oppression of the Hebrew people or of the Latin American peasants. To suggest that we are is to trivialize oppression. It is a little like the student who talked about his experience of rejection as his own holocaust. That was to trivialize the holocaust and to make a fool of himself. The Oppression/Liberation analogue is deficient as a controlling analogy for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

### **The Exile/Advent Analogy**

A second proposal for a dominant metaphor for our time is that of Exile/Advent. In the initial occasional paper issued by the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), entitled *Disciplines of Readiness*, Walter Brueggemann contends persuasively and beautifully for the analogy that I call Exile/Advent. In doing so, he represents not only his own position but that of others as well. The Exile/Advent argument runs something like this. The mainline churches in the United States are in a setting of exile, banished now from powerful control or even influence over the public domain, subject to others more than an agent affecting others. It is a period of displacement from the center of life to the margins. The documentation for such an argument is familiar: membership loss, the decline of media attention, and the growth of sectarian-type churches.

To be in exile is to be in a strange land, where one feels after the appropriate ways of believing and behaving, but does not presume that the former ways will work. It is a time of internal purging forced by external circumstances. It is a period of banishment from the role of court counselor to the role of court jester. It is a time of reduction to being not the favored friend of power but one of a number of lobbying groups seeking to influence individuals.

Exile, Dr. Brueggemann suggests, was not only a geographical experience in the biblical story. It was geographical of course: the loss of land, the uprooting from a familiar place, the loss of control by the people over their own lives. But, for Israel, exile was

also packed with meanings other than geographical. It was a cultural, political, and spiritual crisis, "where the predominant temptation is assimilation," accepting and conforming to the alien culture's dominant values and behaviors. The issue then is not political and social oppression so much as cultural marginalization and temptation.

In exile, one must learn a new and often coded language (like John on the Isle of Patmos) and give up pretensions. One must preserve what is central, looking toward a time when one's fortunes are restored by the God who disciplines those whom God loves and who in promise are God's elected agents. Thus, in exile, the spiritual disciplines are elevated in importance—study of scripture, worship, prayer, meditation—as one rehearses and reinforces critical identity in an essentially hostile environment. Exile requires Advent. For in exile, one awaits God's mighty deliverance. But the "waiting" one does is active, not passive. It is like the runner who trains as she awaits the race. It is like the preacher who prepares a sermon before Sunday morning. It is like the members of a football team who know that one cannot separate daily and disciplined practice from what happens on Saturday afternoon.

Advent is active waiting for God's deliverance. It is life focused on internal and community disciplines so that one may discern what God is doing everywhere and respond to God's presence when "the time comes."

For those who hold this perspective, the exile of our time is neither geographic nor militarily imposed. It is basically cultural. The power of a consumer culture entices the church to be a consumer-driven institution, to provide such services as physical health, self-esteem, and legitimation of success. That culture's power is so great that it can only be rebuffed by self-conscious disciplines that say no more loudly and more often than yes to the surrounding environment. In exile the church must acknowledge that it is a counterculture or at least a semi-counterculture. It will focus on internal love and justice and seek to be a "light to the world," a "city set on a hill," for it will acknowledge that it has been so implicated in the culture's wrongdoing and wrong thinking that it cannot be "leaven in the lump." The culture is alien, hostile, threatening. The church must be a disciplined community of Advent. It must focus itself before it can focus on the world. Dr. Brueggemann concludes: "Our dominant tale has run out in exhaustion and displacement. In such a situation there is no easy or

quick response. There is only the slow, hard work of poetic alternative."<sup>3</sup> In Exile/Advent, the leaders are not politicians but poets, singing a strange new song in a strange land.

The analogies of Oppression/Liberation and of Exile/Advent are the subject of massive tomes, learned articles, and popular writings. The question I pose as a theological exercise is this: "What is the dominant analogue that you believe is appropriate (descriptively and normatively) for the church today?"

I will nominate one other for your consideration.

#### **Presbyterians in the Period of the Judges**

The church today and tomorrow is and will be like unto that of Israel during the Period of the Judges. During that period, there was no centralized authority. There were tribes of people with diverse practices and behaviors. Each tended, for the most part, to its own affairs; the energies and resources of each were committed primarily but not exclusively to particular geographic areas. The tribes had their own dialects and stories, yet shared a common language and history. Their primary loyalty to God was expressed through responses to particularized tribal challenges and concerns.

The environment of the tribes was one of interacting peoples. Scholars disagree on the way the tribes occupied the land of Canaan. But I am persuaded of the view that they infiltrated the land slowly and, for the most part, peacefully, with only occasional armed conflicts.<sup>4</sup> The individual tribes settled predominantly within a particular geographic area. But they lived in dynamic interaction with their Canaanite neighbors over an extended period of time. In such an environment, assimilation was always a recognized and opposed threat. Indeed, this temptation had extraordinary strength because the economic, political, and cultural arenas were shared. The religious and theological task of the Period of the Judges was, therefore, one of retention and advancement of identity while remaining engaged both with the other tribes of Israel and with the surrounding culture.

The tribes of Israel were focused locally while relating constructively to each other. Also, during the time of the judges there were central sanctuaries. The tribes came together when there were challenges, threats, and opportunities applicable to all. And they came together to celebrate their oneness, given by God.

But the normal routine for each tribe was to be concerned and to care for itself and its own environment. The connecting ties

were important but loose and probably tenuous, requiring intense attention to bonds of commonality, lest *tribalism* prevail. But the connectedness was a presupposition with minimal operational procedures, organization, and leadership. Professor David Gunn has written about this period: "There was a blurring of models of leadership and community."<sup>5</sup> Yet God's presence was affirmed as much as when there had been strong and central authority figures and political configurations, for example, during the days of Moses and Joshua. But in this era, the focus was on clearing and claiming the immediate area for God's reign through creative, if untried and often unfulfilling, endeavors.

During the Period of the Judges, the cry, "There is no King in Israel" was a recurring refrain. It was a theological claim. Because God was ruler over all, no permanent office or ruler was required, though offices and leaders were necessary. The connective tissue between and among the tribes consisted of common convictions and common commitments that were called on in times of threat and challenge. A central shrine symbolized that connectedness, but the energies were more local than trans-tribal. It was a particular burden upon the tribe to remember its connectedness. To do so was not natural, but contrived, a matter of self-conscious discipline.

In the Period of the Judges the energies expanded by each tribe are measured by whether or not their own location is being transformed to evidence God's universal rule. And the celebrations of tribal achievements are understood to cohere with, not contradict, the commonalities that flow across tribal boundaries and are a part of the common history.

My own sense is that our condition as a denomination is *not unlike* (a cautious analogy) that of the Period of the Judges. Appropriate attention, energies, and resources are channeled not to or through central sanctuaries and structures but to particular, local regions of responsibility. We have no compelling national or regional leaders who symbolize our oneness across boundaries and across times. No central or regional office carries with it legal, traditional, or moral authority, though no person or group is excluded from exercising such authority. Leadership is periodic, episodic, fleeting, and not even something that is to be sought, though it may be required and bestowed. Leadership is earned by perceived contributions to the immediate environment, not by extended contribution to a larger community. Or, leadership is bestowed because of the uncommon moral persuasiveness of the

person through sacrifice or contribution. Ben Weir is an example of a contemporary judge, one who refreshes our moral and spiritual lives for a brief period of time, but who is devoid of enduring official power. A moderator does not majesty make!

In our time, while some remember the days of Moses and Joshua and some long for kings to stride over the horizon, others are content with the belief that it is indeed good that "there was no King in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes (Judges 17:6)." This is not a proclamation of individualism, but of shared responsibility within defined and clear arenas of accountability, for instance, tribes occupying and humanizing their own communities. The testimony of moderator after moderator of the General Assembly, those itinerant beggars for recognition of the national and international church, is of the dynamism of local churches in their local communities. Their other observation is the complete absence of name recognition of denominational leaders, including themselves. In a time of judges official leaders—other than the occasional and ephemeral judges—deal more with process than with content and position. As such they are clothed in invisibility.

### **The Temptation to Tribalism**

I believe that our time of pluralism, localism, and marginalization is not unlike the Period of the Judges. It is certainly that descriptively. Tribal units are everywhere; local churches, presbyteries, and Chapter 9 organizations abound. Synods, General Assemblies, and theological institutions are examples. For some, the real church gathers only in the summer at Montreat or Ghost Ranch. But across the land no particular one of these units is accorded any more prestige and support than another. Thus, power is diffuse and dependent on persuasive skills and exemplary models, not on offices and structured realities. Credibility must be earned and re-earned. It is not an endowment of office. Leaders filled with moral authority rise and then fade away. Continuity is not in institutions, in offices, or in persons but in shared values incorporated and lived out locally. All seek to transform their particular region of the globe but will not be made to be agents of duplication of other successful efforts. It is a time of tribes whose structural, programmatic, and leadership needs or wants are minimal. Tribes abound. Ours is like the Period of Judges.

One negative evaluation of the tribal period is that it slides so easily into tribalism, where one tribe is elevated in value and power over all others. If and when that happens, there is a theological heresy. But the period of tribes need not be a period of *tribalism*, though that is a clear temptation and, to be truthful, often the actual experience. But the tribal period in the Bible represented a time when unity was based, according to George Mendenhall, on "common religious ethics, not political organizations, obsession with centralized power, and the desire for imposed conformity of practice, whether by state or temple."<sup>6</sup> That seems to me to be analogous to our situation—unity is a frail flower that depends on shared values being nurtured and *proposed*, not imposed. It is a time of persuasion, not coercion. Our time is a time of celebration of local initiatives and local achievements. In such a time, the task is one of holding before each of the tribes the common history and language, the shared values, the importance of horizons of beyondness that guard against tribalism. It means a self-conscious and enthusiastic embrace of the persuasive and the exemplary, in contrast to the imposed and the required. It is a time for common festivals more than common legislation. Thus, for example, at General Assembly the worship is genuinely the center, not the margin. For when one is marginalized institutionally, one recovers and places at the center of one's practice what is unique to one's identity. One recovers the virtues of passivity—being nurtured by coming together around a common table, for instance—as taking precedence, while not excluding the active virtues of wheeling and dealing and delivering. The latter remain important, necessary, and theologically obligatory. The tribes will fight over significant issues, but the central sanctuary given to them is the symbol of their unity. And local, regional, and national leadership have as one of their primary responsibilities the nurturing of the wider scope of God's rule and the church's calling.

In a time of judges, the religious group's power to affect the surrounding environment, though limited, remains significant. If it is not a time of power, neither is it a time of displacement from power, or the absence of public power, as in the exile. It is a time of continued engagement with the culture, utilizing resources of personnel, knowledge, presence, and money, to transform the culture. It is indeed a time of singing new songs, a cultural response. It is also a time of utilizing people power and money power in ways that go against and seek to influence the dominant culture. Illustrations of the latter are the powerful presence of Presbyterian

visitors to Central America in subverting possible military responses to that region, and of congregations in moving local and regional communities to establish shelters and food banks. These are political and economic engagements.

### **The Scope of Our Vocation**

Sociologically, the Period of the Judges is our present and our future. And if a continuing theological temptation of such a time is tribalism—the localization of the church and the domestication and trivialization of God—then the challenge is the scope of the church’s witness and work.

In our reflection about the future of the denomination, we look at the past and the present. We inquire, “What are the biblical analogues that are justifiable sociologically and theologically?” There are several tests for both. Sociologically, one must ask what the better fit is between the biblical time and our condition. Is Oppression/Liberation, Exile/Advent, the Period of the Judges, or some other analogue most apt in illuminating our ecclesiastical situation with reference to internal dynamics and external relations? And theologically, how does the model reflect faithfulness to the God we seek to serve and to whom we are accountable?

One testing point for the latter is the doctrine of vocation, a conviction embedded within our Reformed heritage. Vocation has at least two levels of application. One is the corporate call; the church is called. The second is the individual call; a person is called. There is a presumption of coherence between the two. Further, there is the unifying belief that in fulfilling one’s vocation, one’s life is transformed and fulfilled.

In an individualizing church and society, vocation may lose its corporate sense. It is, however, that dimension of vocation on which I want to concentrate. To do so I will address fulfillment and move back from there.

Some time ago, I ran across this quotation from Aristotle. “Happiness is the exercise of vital powers along lines of excellence in a life affording them scope.” That quotation seems apt for a consideration of vocation, whatever the biblical analogue we choose, though it lacks the content that a particular religious tradition can afford.

Using Aristotle, the church’s vocation is to “exercise its vital powers along lines of excellence in a life affording them scope.”



The "vital powers along lines of excellence" are indicated in the scripture by such terms as gentleness, peace, hope, love, justice, kindness, and so forth. But the issue to focus on in a time of judges is "scope." If the temptation is tribalism, the challenge is "scope." The temptation for tribes is to become tribal, to turn in upon themselves, to close others out, to use their vital powers in a narrow orbit. It is to translate calling into a condition, not a process; into grounds for self-congratulation and privilege, not service; to trivialize life by narrowing it to the dimensions of one's own region of the land or the region that one's mind currently occupies.

An issue *theologically* for the adequacy and validity of the metaphor or analogue of the Period of the Judges is the question of scope. What range of experience and inclusiveness is the metaphor able to encompass?

Theologically, the scope of our calling of proclamation and service is universal. There is one sovereign God, creator, ruler, and redeemer of all. Whether it is the time of the judges, the kings, the prophets, the early church, or a new time, the ongoing trajectory of the gospel is toward the blessing of all the peoples of the world; toward a worship of the one God who is the one Lord of all that has been, is, and will be; toward the day of consummation when all shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God; toward love of God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Yet, a local community, because it is often small and apparently insignificant when measured against the vastness of its calling, can begin to inflate its very good works locally or regionally into the entirety of its calling. It can become defensive and protective of its local life and ministry as sufficient. But, the calling of the people of God is not to illumine only a small area of the global village but all the city of God. Thus, connectedness, in some ways with others and for others beyond the immediate region, is necessary, not elective. The scope of God's rule requires it. It is a *sine qua non* for the nobility of the human endeavor and for the glory of God.

The sense of scope as required for fulfillment or happiness is, first of all, a common, human need. It has been felt by all who have found themselves in a situation too restrictive, not open to the full exercise of their abilities, lacking a challenge to new possibilities. Scope points to the expanded sense of who we are and what we are to do and to be. This sense of scope is related to a

sense of significance. And that sense is always difficult for many, and is perhaps particularly difficult now.

John Updike, the novelist, thinks so:

"Science has made human beings feel less significant: It has diminished our faith. How could it not? It tells us that we're specks of organic matter on an obscure planet in the middle suburbs of a galaxy that's one among millions. Just the scale of the universe that has been revealed to us is truly daunting. If you try for a moment to internalize these numbers, it's very hard to see yourself as a hero or heroine of a cosmic drama—which is, after all, what the great religions tell us we are.

"At the same time I find that just to be human I really seem to need a dose of church now and then. I need some sort of otherworldly point of reference. . . . But all church services have this wonderful element: People with other things to do get up on a Sunday morning, put on good clothes and assemble out of nothing but faith—some vague yen toward something larger."<sup>7</sup>

An expanding universe reduces or unsettles our sense of cosmic location and of significance. That is Updike's claim. But the doctrine of vocation affirms and elevates the church's and the individual's role to a scope of outlandish proportions, to cosmic significance.

Corinthians says it best:

"Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

"Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were

powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.' "

*(1 Corinthians 1:20-31)*

If we live in a time of tribal relationships, we are protected from tribalism by the renewal of the sense of our calling. Our calling is vast and encompassing not because of our habitation in the universe or our geographical position, but because we are enlisted in God's working to redeem the cosmos. God's call connects the local with the universal.

It is, I hope, apparent that the issue of scope is initially not one of geography but of vision and engagement. It was Thoreau who said "I have traveled widely but never left Walden Pond." So we may travel far without leaving a particular geographic location. Indeed, we are called to do so. Concern for a world where there are no nuclear bombs may start with a discussion of war and the Christian faith locally, and move toward public policies that shape the global future. Evangelism overseas is connected with evangelism at home. Drugs in our neighborhood are connected with drug lords in other nations. The filaments of connection between local and beyond are undeniable. We are a connected world and people.

If scope is a human issue, and the drive of the gospel and therefore for humans is toward universal citizenship and responsibility, the dangers of tribalism are not restricted to localism. There remain threats of mobism and mass hysteria, both of which prey on a sense of insignificance internalized by persons. But the test of a tribal period is how the universal scope that is normatively powerful for Christians will be realized. That it will be sought is clear. Religious and parachurch organizations abound that offer to connect local congregations with the broader community. We may not like the content of their various claims, but scope is one thing the people seek—to be part of an ennobling, generous movement that bestows significance and allocates power. What the German poet Rilke feared more than death, others fear: the possibility that

life might become mired down in a dirge of the prosaic, that life will be only local, trivial, lacking in scope. The church's task is simultaneously to confirm and to transform its own and individuals' vocations as ministries of God's gospel of universal love and responsibility, so that each tribe or congregation is a declared agent of universal ministry locally. Scope becomes a critical theological criterion for peoples who are residents of a time of judges. It is so in the light of theological convictions and in the light of their own human needs. How shall that scope be realized? We turn next to that question.

### **The Structure of Procedural Justice**

It should be no surprise that in addressing scope I return to a classic Presbyterian preoccupation—structure. First, the insistence on structure as reflective of theological commitments is valid in all generations. Because we believe that structures both carry and express values, we are not prepared to do away with them. But second, the question of structures is new in each generation. We are not structural fundamentalists—in the sense of being committed to one form of structure. "Structure was made for humans, not humans for structures."

In a time of judges in which there is longing for, but not agreement on, the content of the future, there is one form of justice that all Presbyterians can affirm for both church and society. It is procedural justice. Michael Walzer argues that procedural justice is a form of distributive justice that does not allocate goods but rights, that is concerned with fairness in processes of decision making, not in the decision made. Procedural justice is the structure that holds together societies that are diverse and pluralistic with reference to goals to be sought and ends to be achieved.<sup>8</sup>

We are concerned, if for nothing else, with procedural justice. We are concerned that a person gets his or her day in court, that one plays by the rules, that one is not excluded from the game. We have rules to ensure due process. We stack up policies to ensure that access to information and power are universally distributed. We seek to guarantee the open flow of information. And these are no small contributions. These procedures reflect substantial values of inclusiveness, equality, and respect for differences.

This procedural justice is also honored or tarnished depending on how one plays the game. Procedural justice affirms and seeks

to provide for openness, candor, and respect for all the players. It is subverted by techniques of manipulation, techniques that focus on the joy of power accumulation and on power use rather than on the public purposes to be served by power. Manipulation subverts respect for procedures and those who practice it. It is a peculiar temptation for leaders for whom process is the milieu. It finally diminishes them and the procedures they are expected to serve.

To speak of procedural justice is appropriate for a period of tribal confederation, for it weaves the fragile wires that hold the groups together. Its importance is affirmed as well because it legitimates conflict as both inevitable and appropriate. It overcomes the bias toward harmony in religious communities in which people often prefer to switch rather than fight, because disagreements faced directly and struggled over to resolution where there are winners and losers are perceived to be "not quite religious." But conflict within the boundaries of procedural justice ennobles the loser as well as the winner, for both have demonstrated justice commitments by their participation.

And finally, we should see our governance structures not just as structures for ordering our lives. We should understand them as structures of awe and ennoblement. Governing bodies and committees and other assorted official groups are not often experienced as such. But that is their intention. That is why governing bodies are the church at worship, not just governing bodies. They are a structure of awe because they are signs of a community beyond ourselves. They are structures of ennoblement because through them we are enabled to participate in a community that is beyond us and that points beyond itself. The governing body ought to produce the awe that comes as we get a larger vision of what God is doing, larger both qualitatively and quantitatively as we see and participate in an ennobling experience. It ought to evoke a sense of privilege to participate in something beyond ourselves, giving scope to our lives.

Such awesome and ennobling structures are, we know all too well, at times petty and bogged down in the trivial, but they are gifts of God for God's own purposes. Their leaders are lobbyists for the universal scope of God's intention and work and therefore for the scope given to us for the exercise of our powers of excellence. Without that scope there is neither happiness (Aristotle), nor rest (Augustine), nor life (Jesus).

## Conclusion

Analogies, our calling, our structures—these are signposts, motivations, and means for our movement into the future. They are frail reeds in themselves. They depend not only on our insights, imaginations, and struggles but on God's gracious power. Or, to invite into consciousness another biblical figure, they are earthen vessels with real usefulness, but they show that the transcendent power, the power beyond our power, belongs to God, not to us. Analogies, therefore, usher us into thinking and reflecting about them in the light of God's gracious love in Jesus Christ. All analogies, definitions of vocation and structures, are partial, fragmentary, provisional. But they or some others like them are necessary to move us beyond where we are to where we shall be. Where is that? The late H. Richard Niebuhr put it best for me.

He wrote:

"Thus Christians understand themselves and their ethos . . . somewhat in this fashion. They cannot boast that they have an excellent way of life for they have little to point to when they boast. They only confess—we were blind in our distrust of being, now we begin to see; we were aliens and alienated in a strange, empty world, now we begin sometimes to feel at home; we were in love with ourselves and all our little cities, now we are falling in love, we think, with being itself, with the city of God, the universal community of which God is the source and governor. And for all this we are indebted to Jesus Christ, in our history, and in that depth of the spirit in which we grope with our theologies and theories. . . . This one is our physician, this one is our reconciler to the Determiner of our Destiny. To whom else shall we go for words of eternal life, to whom else for the franchise in the universal community?"<sup>9</sup>

This vision stands over against our present experience, while it is simultaneously mediated through our human experience. This "beyondness" is at once judgment of our present and invitation toward the future.

### Notes

1. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1985).

2. The correlation of Jesus as the bearer of freedom with the exodus affirms the unity of the Old and New Testaments. It also underscores the corporate character of God's deliverance, rejecting any who would foster an exclusive focus on individual salvation. In a more extended article one would want to distinguish among the variety of liberation theologies that have been written and lived. It is plausible, for example, to locate some liberationists in the Exile/Advent analogy, e.g., Rubem Alves.

3. Walter Brueggemann, *Disciplines of Readiness*. Occasional Paper No. 1. (Louisville, Ky.: Theology and Worship Ministry Unit, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1989).

4. Cf. Robert G. Boling, *Judges*. Anchor Bible, Vol. 6A (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975). For a very helpful review of interpretations of "the conquest," set within a study guide, see *Choosing Sides: The Book of Judges from an Asian American Perspective* by Virstan Choy and Marion Lew, Asian American Christian Education Curriculum Project, Presbytery of San Francisco, 1986.

5. David M. Gunn, "Joshua and Judges," *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1987), 104.

6. George Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1973). See especially chs. 1 and 7.

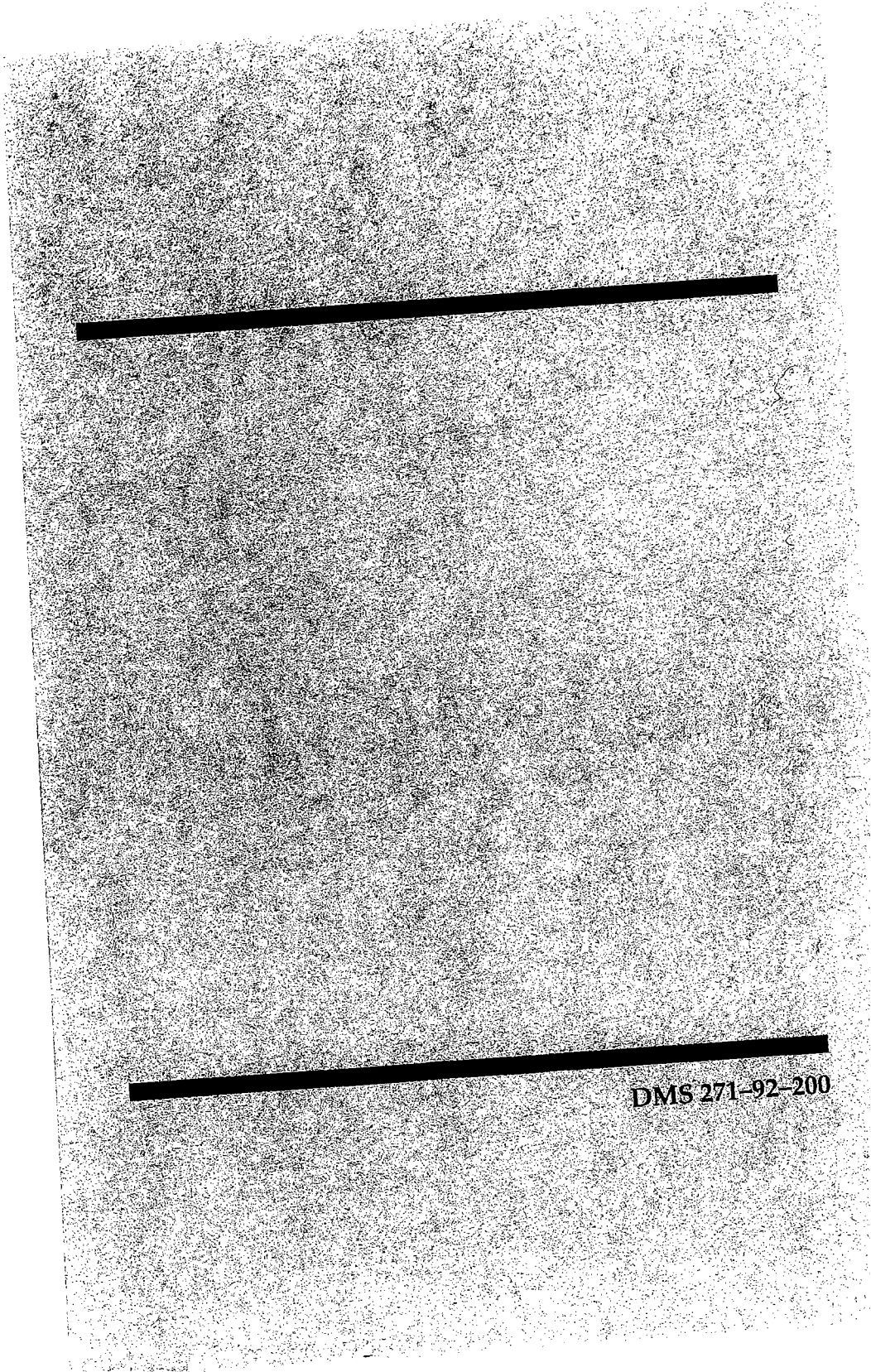
7. John Updike, *U.S. News and World Report* (October 20, 1986), 67.

8. Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism & Equality* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1983).

9. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 177-178.

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