

A THEOLOGY OF VOCATION

by Dr. Jack L. Stotts

Preface

On the weekend of December 7-9, 1990 a group of forty-six people assembled at the Briarwood Presbyterian Retreat Center in Argyle, Texas for a Consultation on Preparation for Ministry. This event, sponsored by the Church Vocations Ministry Unit and the Committee on Theological Education, brought together selected representatives of the four primary partners involved in the preparation for ministry process including sessions, inquirers/candidates, committees on preparation for ministry and theological institutions. The Consultation, a follow-up to one held in 1987 (a year after the new preparation for ministry process was approved by the General Assembly) was designed to review how the church has "lived into" the new preparation process. More specifically the goals of the Consultation were:

- to assess how the preparation process is working
- to identify procedures and/or relationships that need immediate attention;
- to propose ways to respond to the needs so identified.

Dr. Jack Stotts, president of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, delivered the keynote address entitled "A Theology of Vocation." For the duration of the event, Dr. Stotts interacted with the group as the theologian-in-residence. In this capacity he dialogued with individual participants and staff while also sharing timely insights on issues related to call, vocation, and preparation for ministry.

Consultation participants were of one voice in expressing appreciation to Dr. Stotts for his message and ministry during the December event. The insights he shared were fresh and refreshing, stimulating to the head as well as the heart, nourishment for the soul.

At the conclusion of the event, participants affirmed the timeliness of the keynote address and voted unanimously, to recommend that it be reprinted and shared with other persons and committees related to the preparation for ministry process.

In support of this spirited request, the staff of the Office of Preparation for Ministry is pleased to make available a copy of the address "A Theology of Vocation" We trust that this address will serve to stimulate creative dialogue on the subject of vocation and call to ministry, and be a helpful resource for those who provide guidance to persons seeking to discern God's will for their lives.

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Calling and Choice

Annie Dillard in her collection of essays entitled *Teaching a Stone to Talk* writes: 'We can live any way we want. People take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience - even of silence - by choice. The thing is to stalk your calling in a certain skilled and supple way, to locate the most tender and live spot and plug into that pulse. This is yielding, not fighting, ' (p.16).

Given that Annie Dillard is writing for people who by no necessary virtue of their own have a range of choice open to them, and given that they can assume survival (and that includes us who are Presbyterian) then the matter of choice with reference to a calling is a given. People decide what they will do with their lives. That decision is always set, of course, in a context of limitations - social, physical, cultural, psychological, and historical, to name a few. But choice I have. That is a given.

But whether or not I have a vocation, that is something else. A vocation is something, Dillard says, "to be stalked in a skilled and supple way." A vocation is elusive, often hiding in the forest of ambiguity. Should I do this or shall I do that?

It is chameleon-like, changing color to blend into a changing environment. How shall I exercise my vocation in this new setting? It is at times aggravating; taking me places I do not wish to go, submitting me to experiences I could prefer to avoid. Does one really need Greek and Hebrew to be a pastor? And perhaps most annoying of all, it is finally a relationship to myself and the surrounding world that I do not so much choose as it chooses me. That is to say, when it comes to vocation choice follows gifts. Choice is response to something given, to a "calling." The invitation for a vocation lies outside myself.

There are many illustrations of this in the secular world. Under the best of conditions the physician is called by the compelling cry of health provision as an important and significant undertaking. The schoolteacher has said yes to the call of education: "There is something important about education that compels my attention." The homemaker has affirmed the claim of child rearing and home nurturing. In all these and other cases, one's choice follows in the wake of powers which have gripped the will and the heart, tender and lively powers. It is a pulse of life. One's life pulse and the pulse of a movement or an area of activities or a cause throb together. That is where a vocation begins to arise. One's will, mind, and heart stand at attention when one of these powers, like an ancient muse, descends and offers a life of challenge, meaning, and purpose. Choosing a vocation is a little like choosing a mate. One falls into love, that is, into the strange power called love which, one acknowledges, one did not so much create but to which one consents. So, one consents to a vocation. That is the quality of choice with reference to a vocation. It is a response to a power outside oneself that is attractive and compelling. One stalks a vocation only to find that one has been stalked by it!

And for Christians, the stakes are elevated when one talks this way. For now one sees how this secular pattern is an echo of the call theologically understood. Paul Hanson in *The People Called* describes, as do many others, the pattern of Israel and the church's calling as that of divine initiative and human response. God calls. The people respond. The first choice is not ours, but God's. God stalks us, ever so supplely; and God's stalking is the context of our search and choice. The pulse of the world is God's living presence - lively and tender. Theologically, the context of vocation is God's initiative, which is always respectful of our freedom. And our consent/choice is set within the context of God's prior choice. That is the first thing to say. It can be said more simply, like this: God calls. God chooses. That is God's gift to us. It is the ground of our common ministry. Baptism is not the ground. It is the acknowledgment of the ground. The ground is God's initiative, God's presence among us, giving us what we need for meaning, purpose, and significance - a vocation - and giving us that in relation to what, we believe, the world needs as well. In Jesus Christ our lives are given meaning by being set within a network of purposive relationships that have ultimate significance. That means

that when we find ourselves in that setting we affirm that we have been given a vocation. Having said that much, let me now address the following questions:

1. Who is called?
2. Who mediates the call?
3. What characterizes the leader?

God Calls the Church

First, theologically speaking, a *people is* called, not an individual. About this we are often confused. We turn it the other way around. We start backwards, with the individual. But as I understand the biblical accounts, it is Israel who is called, the people, not the individuals in isolation. It is a people in bondage who are called, not Moses. It is the people of Israel, not Israel the persons who are called. It is the people of Israel who are called, not Jesus, unless you understand Jesus as Israel individualized. Jesus is God's people called.

This sense of corporate calling is difficult for all of us who are residents of a highly individualistic age. We tend to think of the primary social agent as the individual. We are suspicious, often rightly so, of the power of the corporate group to distort and disfigure our lives.

But the abuses of corporateness do not negate the recurring biblical witness: God calls a people. It is not Abraham by himself but Abraham's tribe, including Sarah, that is called to go to a new land. A tribe is a people - with boundaries, identity, purposes, histories, and hopes. In the exodus it is the people of Israel who are called to freedom from the oppressor. God's mandate to Pharaoh is, "Let my people go!" not, "Let Moses and Aaron and Miriam go." It is a people who are called to a new way of life. It is Jesus and the disciples who are called - who are given meaning, purpose, and significance. It is the people who are called, prior to the individual.

The people who are called are a people who have been prepared to discern the call and to respond. That is what we mean by "providence." God has provided for the people to be ready to hear and to see, to discern, God's presence among them. That grounding of the people is not clear until God makes it clear. But it is a people whose lives churn as they seek meaning and significance and purpose. And while God has surely been at work among all the peoples of the world, and in that sense all the peoples of the world are called by God, yet God has called one people as God's chosen agents of reconciliation and *shalom*. "How odd of God to choose the Jews!" But these are the people who are prepared and called to reflect God's rule of service. These are the people called to service.

Isaiah 49 is the text to which I continually return (Isaiah 49:6): "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the pre- served of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the *end of the earth*" (RSV, emphasis added.) You, Israel, are called, and you are the agent of service by which all people may indeed know God the Lord. And of course that is echoed in Philippians where Paul testifies that "every knee should bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (2:10-11).

Among all the people, Israel and the new Israel are called to be God's agent, pro- claiming the good news of God's enduring, delivering, nurturing, and freeing presence. To be a new people and to call all to the realization of meaning, purpose, and significance of a world filled with justice, love, and peace, is the common calling of Israel and the church.

The people of Israel and the church con- sent to the vocation God gives them - though they do not do so consistently and without misusing from time to time their gifts.

How do we translate that to today? Let me suggest some reflections.

The church is a people who are called. We do not come to calling *de novo*. We come out of a history of a peoplehood. The church consists of many subtribes. They are called Presbyterian, or Baptist, or Roman Catholic, etc.

All of these people have been and are called to be God's sign and God's agents of reconciliation and *shalom*. That is God's gift to us. We are called. God has given us the gift of calling. That is to say, God has given us the O of meaning, purpose, and significance. Further, it is the church, the people, the whole people who are called to respond to God's gift, not initially individuals, but the church - the whole church. The gospel is a community-creating power, creating community for the sake of an ever-enlarging community. By enlarging I do not mean simply numbers, though I do not deny that. But larger in the sense of largeness of spirit, largeness of concern. Again God called all the people. The church discerns and serves that call. It announces it by word and deed. It verifies it. It lives under it. It lives under God's initiative. Who does God call? God calls the church not for privilege, not for status, but for service. That is the first thing to say. Who is it that

The Church as Mediating Agent

Now we come to the second question. Who mediates the call? It is the church that mediates the call to individuals. The church becomes God's subordinate calling agent in the world, God's mouthpiece. It calls all peoples to receive the gift and to participate in the ministry. The church does so, it is hoped, by its own life of worship, community, and world construction--its activities in the world.

And one way is by calling leaders for its life.

As God calls the church, so the church calls its leaders to particular church vocations. The church does so initially by sharing the gift of reconciliation/shalom. It is in the context of the church's provision of meaning, purpose, and significance that it invites, encourages, provides for, and calls individuals in to leadership responsibilities. It is the church's life itself, offering the gifts of meaning, purpose, and significance, that is the context of and that engenders the call to individuals

Let me put that a different way; the church calls by its very life. The agent of calling is the content of the life of the congregation presbytery, synod, and General Assembly. Those communities are at their best an inviting and empowering context. To participate in a congregation, for example, is to enter a community that is inviting and empowering simultaneously. It is for the most part the congregation, which calls people into leadership. That is very diffuse consequently, but if one thinks about one's own life perhaps one gets the glimmer of what is being suggested. It was the life one lived within a purpose, and proposed some significance for your life. You were given that before you decided to say yes to be a leader of that life. This is the "life together" that Dietrich Bonhoeffer talks about, the "life together" out of which perhaps one begins to wonder whether one might be a leader.

However, there is another thing that must be said about this. There must be specific solicitation for leaders. There must be specific solicitation for leaders. There must be the discipline of defining and then raising up leaders within and for the church. That is not a passive activity. The call is not a passive activity. As God takes the initiative in calling a

people, so the church takes the initiative in calling its leaders. There has to be a specific solicitation of leaders--of the potential leaders. It may be something as simple as a sermon preached on "have you considered the ministry?" Or it may be as simple as someone tapping you on the shoulder and saying "You know, I think you would be a good pastor." But from such "simple" acts flow God's call. The call does not happen without an agent. It does not happen *powerfully or meaningfully*, it seems to me, without a specific agent who articulates the call of God.

When we come to talk about the church and the call, we have to talk about the church calling its potential leaders to be ministers of the Word. That is not a passive activity. The church takes the initiative as God takes the initiative. So the church takes the initiative to search out and, as it were, designate its pastors. The leaders called are those who are to take responsibility for the ordered life of the church. Theirs is not the ministry of the whole church. But their responsibility is for the ordered life of the church. Through the preaching and teaching of the Word, the church's life is to be ordered. This is not just life in the church, but the life of Christians and the church in the world.

In the same way, the elders are called to order the life of the church, and the deacons are called to order the life of the church. It is the ordering activity to which leaders are caused. These leaders are always expressive of what the people are, who they are, what they believe they should be. The leaders are always expressive of who the people are that caused them and also of who the people believe, in their better moments, they should be. Why? Because part of the peoples' life that calls is the eschatological dimension - the hope; the realization of the kingdom; the fulfillment of hopes and visions and dreams. When the church calls its leaders, whether to be ministers of the Word and Sacrament, or elders, or deacons-whatever the office is- these leaders are to order the church out of the past and present and toward the future that is promised.

The task of the church's, leaders is to help the church to move toward that which is to be. I believe that it was George Bernard Shaw who quipped, "The good thing about the British is that when they had their empire at least they never preached what they practiced!" He was saying that the British always preached what was beyond their practice. That is

the kind of "ordering" that goes on. The order of the church is a dynamic ordering toward the future. The people choose the leaders. The church chooses its leaders. It *stalks* them through the context of the church's common life. It stalks them, sometimes surreptitiously, sometimes blatantly. It stalks them because the continued faithfulness of the church depends upon finding those leaders who can order the church's life toward that kind of a future. At its best it stalks those who will be keepers of the tension between the now and God's future - a future of justice, righteousness, and peace, where all people and every person live lives of meaning, purpose, and significance. But the leader is dependent on the people for that call.

Because there are subtribes of Christians, there are subtribes of leadership. And the kind of leadership that one subtribe seeks is nuanced differently from the kind of leadership that another subtribe seeks. Presbyterians seek leaders who have certain kinds of gifts and abilities different from, let's say, the Lutherans. Each subtribe has to be quite self-conscious about its type of leadership and what it is that constitutes leadership. Not every denomination has "Standard Ordination Exams." Why? Because an educated clergy is not as important for that particular communion as it happens to be for the Presbyterians. So that when we Presbyterians are talking about criteria for ministry, we have to be 'tribe-specific.' The definition may change over time. But it will always be shaped by a particular past and sense of the future.

We not only "call" the leaders, but we call them on the basis of a definition of what they are to do. We need to be clear about what it is we want them to do. If we are not clear what it is we want them to do, we cannot call the right people.

Further, we need to be aware that many of those whom we call today are "unchurched." They lack the richness of an ecclesial experience that has fostered and engendered the calling in previous generations. They have not all known the powerful texture of "life together" that was the context and content for earlier generations. A recent study of Presbyterian seminaries includes this striking observation: more Presbyterians graduate from Presbyterian theological institutions than enter them. People become Presbyterians in seminary, without experiencing the Presbyterian way of being "church" in the world. In a recent article in

The Atlantic Monthly, Paul Wilkes, the author, quotes Rabbi Neil Gillman of the Jewish Theological

"You know the biggest problem with our students?" Gillman asked. "Sounds, Tastes. Smells! Me? I didn't know anything intellectual, but I was inhaling Judaism from the cradle on. Soup and candies and boiling cabbage and latkes and gefilte fish, kasha, kreplach, pot roast."

Gillman's face, still cherubic in late middle age, relaxed, as if his olfactory system were responding to a memory. "These kids are smart, and the intellectual stuff they get easily, but it's hard to get the other: the ritual sensuality of Jewish religious life. The guts of it. How do you teach that?"

It is the context of a common life that is often missing or which has a texture that is looser and thinner, a substance drained of layered meaning. A weak broth, not a rich soup. Presbyterians in theological institutions need their minds stretched. But they - and many other Presbyterians - need their souls stretched, too. Perhaps today more than ever.

For example, I remember well when I first took communion. I was twelve and had been confirmed. The service was one anticipated for years. Denied the bread and cup because of the understanding of that time, I wondered what it would be like - these cubed pieces of white bread and the grape juice lapping at the brim of miniature chalices. I remember still today - more than forty years later - the lively sponginess of the bread to my touch, its softness to my tongue. But more strongly still I recall the sweet taste of the juice, and it was for me a foretaste of a world about which one would exclaim, "How sweet it is!" That sense of promise and hope - that "fore-taste" still lures me forward to a future of peace, love, and justice. "That taste of glory" is renewed every time I am given bread and cup and taste the promise of "sweetness." Fewer of our students have this type of church experience.

And we are back to the context. How shall we call an individual unless there is a rich congregational life? How shall we call *leaders* unless there is a rich congregational life? Or there is a rich *life of worship and life together* at seminary? Or a rich life together at presbytery? For the people's life is

the context for and content of the call. In seminaries we have Christians who need their minds stretched. But we also have Christians looking for their souls to be stretched as well. I think in my generation we were primarily looking to have our minds stretched. We presumed a powerful and deepening spiritual context.

Characteristics of Leaders

Finally, what are the characteristics of the one who is called? Let me suggest some of those. One could add to or subtract from these I note.

First of all, *accountability*. If there is anything within our own Presbyterian system that relates to carrying out leadership, it is accountability. We are accountable to one another. We used to be "subject to our brothers and sisters in the Lord." We are not technically "subject" any more, but we are accountable! We are members one of another. We are to bear our neighbor's burdens, and we are to see that the call to a leader in the church is to be to one who is willing to be accountable to the people in their various forms: the congregation, the presbytery, the synod, and the General Assembly. That does not mean agreeing with all of those. Accountability does not mean agreement. It means being willing to give each a proper hearing and response, and to give reasons for disagreement.

Second, those who are called are to be *exemplars of an alternative vision*. Insofar as the church is given a vision by God, so the church is to be a bearer of that alternative vision of what the world is to be or might be. And so the pastor--the person called to the ministry of the Word and Sacrament--and the elder and the deacon are to be bearers of that alternative vision. Even as the church is an eschatological community, so the pastors or other leaders are eschatological figures representing something different than the present. They represent a word of judgment and a word of promise simultaneously. What do I mean by that? For those who are called by the church to leadership, I mean that they are called to be moral exemplars, different in some ways from the world as it is.

We who are ordained try at times to avoid this exemplary role. We know and confess our inadequacies, and our misuse of our gifts and of our office. But the fact remains that leaders are called to exemplify those

characteristics and virtues reflective of the way toward which they would lead others. It has always been so. David, misusing his power, is rebuked by Nathan and recalled to a different life, one worthy of a leader of God's people. Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their failure to observe the "weightier matters of the law." And he lives a life that has called forth *imitatio*: imitation.

This exemplary life is often a source of conflict in the church. Most vividly, perhaps, those who can remember the civil rights struggles of the 60s and 70s can name white and black pastors who exemplified a life of solidarity with black people and were rejected by their white congregations. But those pastors were not separating themselves from their congregations, they were in solidarity with them, pointing, however clumsily or ineffectually, to a new way to which God was calling all the people. That brings me to another characteristic.

Third, those who are called by the church specifically are called to solidarity with their people. One characteristic of ministers of the Word is the capacity to *identify with the people* from whom they have come, that is to say, with the congregation. That is often difficult for pastors. It is very difficult for a variety of good and bad reasons! But it is that kind of identification with the people that Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1940 indicated when he turned around in New York City after having fled the Nazis in Germany. He returns to Germany, before the United States enters the war, while he can still get back to Germany and he said, "I have loved this people. How can I expect to stand with them in seeking peace if I have not stood with them in the midst of war?" That is identification or solidarity with the particular people from whom one has come. It is the church that has called us; it is the church with whom we are in solidarity. That does not mean leaders are uncritical! Certainly Bonhoeffer was not uncritical of the German church. But to be critical is a way of standing in solidarity.

Finally, another characteristic. If the church calls a leader, and says to this person, "I think you should consider the ministry," that person must understand that she or he can *depend* on the calling community. If we are a calling agent, we are advocates of that person. If we are the calling agent, we presume that that person is going to make it to the end! The task is to create conditions of empowerment rather than conditions of

"gatekeeping" do not mean that we do not keep gates! It means that prior to keeping gates is providing conditions for empowerment. A person who is called, because that person is responding to our initiative, ought to be able to depend on us.

Calling and Community

We in the church are callers. Yet, I think our students are too often "set loose" to make it on their own. We say to them, "You've got to make it. . . ." Rather, we should say, "we've got to make it, together! We say to the seminarian, or the inquirer, or the candidate, 'We have called you. We believe we've made the right judgment. And we are going to see this through to the end.'" That does not mean that one does not have to say no at some point. But the context is different when you see yourself as an advocate and the calling agent. That does not mean you lower standards. It means you are wise in your calling.

Finally, then, our vocation as committees and cooperative agents is to provide a kind of context of empowerment. That is why we come together [inquirers, candidates, committees on preparation for ministry, seminaries, sessions]. It is not just one of us - it is the context, the richness of interrelationships, the richness of accountability structures, the richness of patterns of relationships. Our calling, as we come together, is to find those structures of empowerment so that we may indeed be agents of God's calling.