

# The People Called by God

## -Bible Study

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*"Only by understanding itself as the extension of the biblical community of faith, which was called into existence by God and which derived life and direction solely from communion with God, can the contemporary community of faith fulfill its divine calling."*

### The role of Bible study

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**T**he Bible is a living voice through which the Holy Spirit calls the church to discover and discern God's mission and sends it to participate in God's mission.

Consequently, the Bible is an indispensable source of learning for the church and for the church's transformation journey. There is something we need to learn, and the only place we can find the subject matter for that learning is in the Bible. <sup>1</sup>

***The Bible is a foundational resource for the church.***

What is the church to learn from Scripture that it can learn no place else? The Bible opens up a vision of reality as God intends it. Scripture gives testimony to the presence and activity of God with and through God's people to accomplish God's purposes in the world. The church is called continually to engage in Bible study (hearing, reading, marking, learning, digesting) because the Bible is the source

- of our knowledge of God,
- of our vision of God's purpose,
- of our encounter with the Messiah,
- of our calling as God's people,
- of our hope for creation's healing. <sup>2</sup>

The Bible is not a reference manual for humans to manipulate to give direct answers to modern problems. Rather, the Holy Spirit - God's active presence - illuminates and inspires the Christian community, enabling the community to grow in understanding of God and God's purposes.

The Holy Spirit enables the witness of the biblical communities recorded in biblical texts to enlighten the vision of contemporary communities. Rather than a task for the individual working alone, biblical interpretation takes place within the ongoing life and worship of the congregation. The Bible is not a



dead document, but a living voice waiting to be heard, a voice seeking to give identity and purpose to God's people. And all of God's people are called to contribute to the discovery of the mind or will of God. The many gifts of Scripture for the church today are discovered within the context of the church as a learning community.

***Bible study is always challenging. Each person comes to the study of Scripture from different backgrounds and experiences.***

Each also comes with different expectations of the Bible, different understandings of God, different approaches to reading Scripture, and different ways of interacting with others. As a result, Bible study is a difficult but exciting task. Enabling these differences to be enriching and to contribute to the building up of the whole community is both a challenge and wonderful opportunity for your congregation. The challenge, in particular, is to establish a climate and a process that enables people

- to dig in and study together,
- to be confused and frustrated as they confront unfamiliar words or concepts,

- to argue honestly but lovingly with one another,
- to discuss with commitment but openness to differing opinions,
- to ponder realistically but hopefully the relevance of Scripture to concrete issues facing the church,
- to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit among them, bringing inspiration and illumination.

Most importantly, Bible study needs to be done with a prayer-filled attitude and approach. It invites all to approach with gratitude, humility, and awe for God's undeserved love and mercy. The goal of Bible study is to contribute to the expectation that Christians are called to live a particular way of life together. It is to contribute to the experience of living together in community, as purposeful Christian community. It is to contribute to the discovery of what it means for God's people obediently and faithfully to participate in what God is doing in today's world.



## Questions for reflection and discussion

**Working with one other person, consider and answer the following questions together, sharing your insights and concerns. Take time to listen to and interact with one another.**

**1. What do you think the church has to offer that no other human institution can offer?**

**2. As you look at the challenge of studying Scripture in community (in contrast to the practice of reading Scripture alone), what excites or interests you the most?**

**3. What concerns or questions do you have?**

## Bible study: The People Called by God

*The community of faith in the Bible is the people called. It is the people called forth from diverse sorts of bondage to freedom, called to a sense of identity founded on a common bond with the God of righteousness and compassion, and called to the twin vocations of worship and participation in the creative, redemptive purpose that unifies all history and is directed to the restoration of the whole creation within a universal order of shalom.*<sup>3</sup>

**T**his description of the biblical notion of community is a comprehensive and challenging one, and will be an essential foundation for a transformation journey in your church. It grounds the identity and the mission of the Church not in the needs of individual members, not in the needs of contemporary society, but in the vision of God's unceasing dedication to the healing of creation and the reconciliation of the entire human family with one another and with its God.<sup>4</sup>

The church's mission is to participate in the reconciliation and restoration of the whole creation. To carry out this mission, the church is not called to separate itself from the hungers, problems, or concerns of individuals and of society, nor simply to accept these conditions. Rather, the church is invited to confront these needs by placing them within the per-

spective of God's ultimate vision and purpose for human life. Only in this way can the deepest needs of humanity be discerned and interpreted.

***God's vision and purpose for human life is at the heart of the Bible.***

Through study of the Bible, God's vision and purpose can enrich and enlighten the vision and purpose of communities of faith today. It is key, therefore, for your congregation to understand itself as an extension of the biblical community of faith - called into existence by God, gaining your life and direction from communion with God. By seeing your congregation in this "parade of witnesses" (Hebrews 11:1-12:3) you will be able faithfully to discern and fulfill your calling from God.<sup>5</sup>

To discern God's calling for your church, it is important to keep in mind the thread that binds together the whole biblical testimony. That thread is not an "idea" or even an "ideal," but God's calling and sending of a "people." The call of Abraham and Sarah and their family initiated the entire history of a people called and sent by God.

This is now the focus of our Bible study.



## Questions for reflection and discussion

**Working with one other person, consider and answer the following questions together, sharing your insights and concerns. Take time to listen to and interact with one another.**

**1. What do you think it means to speak of the church as a "called people"?**

**2. What difference do you think it makes to think of your church as an "extension of the biblical community of faith?"**

**3. What new light does it shed on your approach to the Bible to understand the "thread" as "God's calling and sending of a people"?**

*Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

*So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.... (Gen. 12:1-4a, NRSV)*

## **Part One: The call of God embraced**

**T**his account of the call of Abraham illustrates the primary qualities of faithfulness.

Abraham is presented in Scripture as the perfectly faithful person. He is called and he goes. He relies solely upon the word of this God who has suddenly intervened in his life.

Abraham is the founding ancestor of the Hebrew faith, and is the subject of important discussions in the New Testament (cf. Rom. 4; Gal. 3; Heb. 11). Next to Moses, Abraham receives more attention than any other Old Testament

figure. The faith and obedience of Abraham are indeed worthy of our attention.

He heard the call of God and responded with radical trust and obedience. From then on, he lived his life on the basis of that word from God which was both promise and command.<sup>6</sup> Abraham's pilgrimage, his journey with God, was readily accepted by the early Christians as a guide to their own existence.



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## **Part Two: The call of a witnessing community**

**F**ar from being simply the story of an individual and his journeys, the Abraham narratives are significant because they tell the tale of a *people's* beginnings. Abraham's is not an individual call and pilgrimage, but the call and pilgrimage of a particular family, a family through whom all the families of the earth are to be blessed.

But even more dramatic is the cosmic setting of the journey of Abraham and Sarah, which has to do not only with the forming of Israel, but with the re-forming of all of creation! In Genesis 1-11, a picture is painted not only of the beauty and goodness of God's creation, but also the terrible predicament of the human community upon God's good earth. Humans, created "very good," embark on a journey

which leads to fratricide (Gen. 4 - Cain in jealousy kills his brother Abel), great corruption and violence across society (Gen. 6-8 the Great Flood), and even with a new beginning through Noah and his descendants, to a total breakdown in communication, resulting in the dispersal of the human family across the face of the earth (Gen. 11 - Tower of Babel).<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of the call in Genesis 12 is to fashion God's *community* in creation gone awry, to embody in human history the power of the blessing and promise to Abraham and his descendants. It is the hope of God that in this new family all human history can be brought to the unity and harmony intended by the one who calls.<sup>8</sup>



## Questions for reflection and discussion

**1.** How is your understanding of the Abraham and Sarah story affected if you think of it as the call of a community, rather than the call of individuals?

**2.** From what you can understand from the biblical narrative Genesis 1-12, what is God's purpose in God's call to Abraham and Sarah?

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*So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.... (Gen. 12:1-4a, NRSV)*

### ***Part Three: The creative word of God*** ---

**G**en. 11:30 quietly states: "Now Sarai was barren; she had no child."

Genesis 11:30 indicates Abraham's family was at an end; it had played out its future and had nowhere to go. It is within this situation of hopelessness, that God speaks his creative and life-renewing word. It is promised that this

God has the power to make things new by his word, so new that the birth of Isaac (Gen. 21:4) displaces the long-standing and hopeless barrenness of Abraham and Sarah. The God in whom Abraham and Sarah trust is the one "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17).



## Questions for reflection and discussion

**1.** What was the situation in which the word of God was spoken to Abraham? Why is this important?

**2.** What are the characteristics of the God who addresses Abraham?

*Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

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## **Part Four: The journey of the people called**

**A**braham and Sarah are responsive and receptive to God's call. They fully embrace the call and venture forth into the unknown future trusting only in the promises of God. But they are not left on their own. They are not asked to rely upon human reason, practicality, cleverness, logic, or resourcefulness. God journeys with them and promises to provide them with whatever they may need.

We can find in the Abraham narrative of Gen. 12:1-4 qualities that are central to the biblical understanding of community:

1. The divine initiative: God acts first by speaking a powerful and creative word into a particular and concrete situation.
2. The communal rather than individual character of God's call and of God's salvation.
3. The central significance of God's continual guidance and faithfulness.
4. The trust and obedience required of the people.
5. The commission: God's people play a key role in the fulfillment of God's redemptive intent for all peoples.



## Questions for reflection and discussion

**1.** Review the qualities of the biblical understanding of community. What strikes you about these qualities? Which ones jump out at you?

**2.** As you reflect on these qualities, how do they relate to your current expectation and understanding of the church?

**3.** What is the value of grounding a contemporary understanding of the church in the biblical understanding of the community of faith?

## Summary

**W**e begin with the recognition that the church, the community of faith, is a people called by God. The church is God's church. God has called the church to participate in God's own redemptive activity in the world. Part of our work as church leaders and members is to explore the biblical understanding of community in order to discern the call and mission of our own congregations.

The experience of Abraham and Sarah is a guide to understanding our own calling as Christians. Abraham and Sarah heard and responded to God's call with radical trust and obedience. God called and they responded by embracing that call.

The story of Abraham and Sarah should not be interpreted as simply a story of two isolated individuals but as a story of the beginning of a people--the people of God. Starting with Abraham and Sarah, God brought into being a special community to be God's witness, God's own community in a creation gone awry. Through this new family, God intends to bring the whole creation into unity and harmony - shalom - with God.

God's creative word is spoken into a situation of barrenness and hopelessness. God's word does not depend on the potentiality of the persons addressed but carries in itself all that is necessary to begin a new people in history. God calls into being things that do not exist.

***God does not abandon his people but journeys with them.***

As with Abraham and Sarah, God's presence and purpose provide the church today with the motivation and direction for its journey. We too are called to base our lives upon total reliance upon God.

The spiritual journey of the church, of your own congregation, is not an aimless wandering but a purposeful journey. It involves discerning the call and being set on the road to a future full of promise. It involves faithful trust in God's promises and active participation in God's mission.



<sup>1</sup> Verna J. Dozier, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (Cowley Publications, 1991), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Hanson, "The Identity and Purpose of the Church," *Dialog*, Vol. 31, p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (Harper & Row, 1986), p. 467.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 522.

<sup>6</sup> Frank R. VanDevelder, *The Biblical Journey of Faith: The Road of the Sojourner* (Fortress Press, 1988), p. 96.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 105.