

# The People Called by God

## Life Together in Community

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*What life have you if you have not life together?  
There is no life that is not in community,  
And no community not lived in praise of God.<sup>1</sup>*

Bible study is a central component of a congregation's life and mission. *The purpose of Bible study in the church focuses upon a very basic human endeavor, the tender art of living together in purposeful community. That is, the church is understood as a community of people who recognize "what life have you if you have not life together."* Often in the modern world human persons attempt to live as if they are separate and distinct from one another, unaffected by the trials and tribulations--or the joys and celebrations--of others. Cities, states, even nations, act as if they occupy the planet all alone, untouched by the policies and practices of

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<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*, p. 101.

others. Yet all we have to do is to pick up a newspaper or watch a television newscast to discover how interconnected we all are. Social scientists and other observers of modern life verify what we discover by our own practical experience: we receive life, we foster life, we shape life, we pass life on within the context of our fellow humans.

Yet the Christian community--the church--is not simply another human community. The church is a community with a purpose, a community which is to demonstrate to all human communities the purpose of human life: to live in praise of God. Thus the primary focus of Christian community is discovered in its worship: the celebrating, anticipating, remembering, and participating in God's activity in and for the world. Worship, then includes but moves beyond the Sunday morning ritual. Worship points to the nature and mission of the church -- as a people called and formed by God to offer praise to the glory of God.

The purpose of Bible study in the church is to cultivate the congregation as faithful missional community. Meeting together for Bible study will offer primary occasions for the Holy Spirit to shape afresh both the experience and the understanding of Christian community. It will contribute toward a new sense of calling and renewed experience of forming as a people who live to the praise and the glory of God.

#### **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. As you think about the church as community, what images come to your mind?
2. Where do you experience "interconnectedness" within your congregation?

### ***The Challenge to the Church***

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Your congregation exists in a context. Like water to a fish, congregations are often not aware of their cultural context. North American society is the water in which congregations seek to swim

today. Within North American society today, the Christian Church as a whole has been pushed to the margins. Its ministry is being trivialized. While many people may believe that the values and services offered by churches are worthwhile, they often view the church as simply one among many human social institutions. People in our society have many different and conflicting expectations of the church:

- as a social service agency filling the gaps in human services,
- as a promoter of moral values for individuals and/or society at large,
- as a prophetic voice for the poor and oppressed,
- as a sanctuary for the hurt and wounded,
- as an agent of social change challenging the immoral structures of the world.

In this context, with its confusing and multiple demands, your congregation is challenged to discover, clarify, and express its reason for being. How is your congregation to live faithfully within its particular historical and cultural context?

We live in an era of great societal change. Behavioral patterns, roles, values, and expectations of what is important, good, and worthy of one's commitment are undergoing radical transformation. In times like this, the role of the church is often called into question. The danger for the church in these situations is twofold:

- (1) Either to embrace every wind of cultural change as liberating, allowing the surrounding culture to define its mission, and uncritically to accommodate itself to these expectations;
- (2) Or to entrench its position by absolutizing the traditions of the past, ignoring the larger cultural environment, and maintaining the traditional way of doing things whether or not it has meaning or relevance.

Neither of these options is appropriate for a people called to live in praise of God. The church is a community called to witness to God's transforming power and redeeming love for all creation. Thus the church is called continually to the complex task of rooting itself in its biblical heritage as it interacts in a critical but responsive manner with the challenges and opportunities of a radically changing world. The church's life and purpose is not its own. The church is present in the world on behalf of the God by whose love and grace it has been called into existence. The church is called to interact in a significant and meaningful way within the "real" life of the world – and even transform it!

We cannot answer the world's problems by adopting towards them an attitude either of surrender or escape. We can answer the world's problems only by changing our understanding of these problems, by approaching them from a different perspective. What is required on our part is turning toward our source of energy, in the deepest sense of the word....What the Church brought into the world was not certain ideas applicable simply to human needs, but first of all the truth, the righteousness, the joy of the Kingdom of God.<sup>2</sup>

Do you believe that God at all has a creative, redemptive, and transformative purpose in our contemporary world? Do you see the church having an essential role to play in those purposes? If so, it will be necessary for your congregation to discover afresh God's purposes, clarify anew what your church's role is to be, and to manifest it in credible and compelling manner before the watching world.

This will mean finding answers at least to the following questions:

1. What is God calling the church to be about in the midst of the fragmentation and alienation, hostility and suspicion, violence and fear of the modern world?
2. What is it the church has to offer that no other human institution can offer?
3. How can the church shape itself to actualize its unique ministry?
4. Why should the church expect commitment and involvement from people who have multiple demands placed upon their time, energy, and money?

**Questions for reflection and discussion**

*Consider and answer the following questions together. Take time to listen to and interact with one another.*

1. What elements of the current historical and cultural context do you believe are challenging the church to become more clear about its identity and mission?

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Sobornost*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1985), p. 13.

2. What does it mean to you to say, "The church's life and purpose are not its own?"
3. What do you think the church has to offer that no other human institution can offer?

## The Role of Bible Study

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A foundational resource for church renewal or transformation is the Bible, the Old and the New Testaments. The Anglican prayer for Bible study speaks very eloquently of the church's approach to Scripture:

*Blessed Lord, who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ....<sup>3</sup>*

The faith expressed by the prayer is that Scripture is not a collection of timeless truths or moral principles, or an account of ancient history to be studied by those with special interests. Scripture is a primary resource for the church. It is to shape the ongoing life, faith, and worship of God's people. If God caused Scripture to be written for the church's **learning**, then the church must be open and receptive to new insights, to new "instruction" about its identity and purpose. Thus the biblical writings are intended:

*Not for our inspiration. They may inspire, but this is not the purpose as the distinguished Anglican who wrote the collect saw it. Not for our guidance. We may find guidance there, but that is not the purpose of their being written. Not for our comfort, although we may be comforted and strengthened by the sacred history. They are written for our **learning**. 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>4</sup>*

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 activity of God with and through God's

<sup>3</sup> *Book of Common Prayer* (The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 236.

<sup>4</sup> Verna J. Dozier, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (Cowley Publications, 1991), p. 8.

people to accomplish God's purposes in the world. The church is called continually to engage in Bible study (hearing, reading, marking, learning, inwardly 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>5</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 to enable 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,

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Hanson, "The Identity and Purpose of the Church," *Dialog*, Vol. 31, p. 178.

- to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit among them, bringing inspiration and illumination.

And most importantly, Bible study needs to be done with a prayerful 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**

*Consider and answer the following questions together. Take time to listen to and interact with one another.*

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?

What concerns or questions do you have?

## Getting Started

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This Bible study, *The People Called by God*, is designed to enable you to accomplish the following objectives:

### Learning Objectives

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1. To engage with other members of the congregation in Bible study.
2. To reflect upon the biblical witness concerning the identity and purpose of the church.
3. To participate in the building of Christian community through communal study, reflection, and discussion.
4. To identify characteristics of Christian community drawn from group study and reflection on Scripture.

### Some Helpful Norms

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It is always helpful for a group starting out on a learning experience together to clarify the norms which will guide their life together. The following norms or standards are suggested for your journey together. You may want, as a group, to add to the list.

1. It is OK to be informal, to call each other by first names, to create a relaxed atmosphere.

2. It is OK to take responsibility for our own learnings and not expect the group leader/facilitator to have to be responsible for us. Feel free to ask questions when confused and to make contributions when inspired.
3. It is OK to share a different opinion, to disagree without being disagreeable.
4. It is OK to share and test our own ideas, images, or personal experience with others in the group.
5. It is OK to practice our best active listening skills in this group. Active listening means getting involved with those who are speaking, paraphrasing their words, and checking with them to be certain that we have correctly understood them.
6. It is OK to build on the ideas of others in the group, that is, to add our own thoughts to what others have expressed in order to help an idea stretch and grow.
7. It is OK to question the ideas being proposed in the group, or in this bible study resource, but it is also equally OK to question our own ideas and assumptions.

## Overview

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In this study resource, *The People Called By God*, we will explore biblical images of the church in both the Old and New Testaments. The study of biblical images reinforces the conviction that the life of the church is always both *gift* and *call*. *Gift*: the church is grounded in the reality of God who as the gracious source of everything that exists, gives life to all reality. *Call*: yet God calls the church not simply to existence but to a purpose, to participation in God's commitment to restore harmony throughout creation. Thus the identity and mission of the church is not first a human project, but an action of God.

It is an action of God, the triune God--of God the Father who is ceaselessly at work in all creation and in the hearts and minds of all human beings whether they acknowledge him or not, graciously guiding history toward its end; of God the Son who has become part of this created history in the incarnation; and of God the Holy Spirit who is

given as a foretaste of the end to empower and teach the Church and to convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment.<sup>6</sup>

The church has its **origin**, its **identity**, its **mission**, and its **destiny** in the activity of the Triune God. It is "the people united by the unity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."<sup>7</sup> The Father wills it as the people of his personal possession; the Son consecrates it with his living body; the Spirit gathers it into a unique communion. Following a trinitarian pattern, our study is oriented around three major images, each of which actually consists of a constellation of images:

- ❖ The People of God
- ❖ The Body of Christ
- ❖ The Communion of the Holy Spirit

All the images of the church point beyond themselves to God's self-disclosure. The Christian God is not remote and removed from human life, but is known through the divine activity of creative power, redeeming love, and liberating presence in the midst of historical reality. The goal of our study is to use these biblical images as tools, as ways of perceiving afresh that mystery of freedom and mission which is manifested through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit in the midst of the people called by God.

Many of the passages we shall be studying may be very familiar to you. Sometimes particular texts can become so familiar that it is difficult to hear them. Thus one of our goals is to make the time and clear the space to slow down, read carefully, and consider anew the living import of these words of Scripture for our life together in the community of faith.

The questions for reflection and discussion related to the various texts are not intended to be profound or complex, but simply to enable us to interact with the text in a straightforward manner. Use these questions as a resource for your study, but do not let them derail or block your reflection.

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<sup>6</sup> *Leslie Newbigin, The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society (Eerdmans, 1989), p. 135.*

<sup>7</sup> *Cyprian, De Orat. Dom. 23.*

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 conclude with an integrating exercise. These exercises are designed to enable the group to pull together their insights from the Bible study and to draw out the implications for the understanding of Christian community. In Unit 9, all insights and learnings will be brought together into a summary of the dynamic and relational characteristics of Christian community.

Throughout the study, keep in mind that the purpose of this Bible study is to explore the biblical understanding of the church, the community of faith called by God, in order to discern what God is calling your church to be and do as part of God's mission.

### The Design of this Bible Study

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This resource is divided into nine learning units, in five chapters, as follows:

#### **CHAPTER ONE: THE PEOPLE CALLED BY GOD**

Unit 1: Life Together in Community

Unit 2: The Journey of the People Called

The Bible study booklet you are holding contains **CHAPTER ONE**

#### **CHAPTER TWO: THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

Unit 3: The Sense of "People-hood" in Ancient Israel

Unit 4: The New People of God in Jesus Christ

Integrating Exercise: The People of God

#### **CHAPTER THREE: THE BODY OF CHRIST**

Unit 5: Solidarity in Christ

Unit 6: Members of the Body

Integrating Exercise: The Body of Christ

**CHAPTER FOUR: THE COMMUNION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

Unit 7: Outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost

Unit 8: Life in the Spirit: Gifts and Fruits

Integrating Exercise: The Communion of the Holy Spirit

**CHAPTER FIVE: PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER**

Unit 9: Identifying the characteristics of Christian community

## **Bible study: The Journey of the People Called**

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*Here are some helps to guide you through this Bible study:*

1. *Read through each section as a group, with Bible in hand. Read out loud. Pause to look up the biblical references as you read.*
2. *Reflect on what you read in each section by answering the questions in "Questions for Reflection and Discussion."*
3. *To facilitate the formation of your study group as a learning community, join with one other person to consider and answer the questions together. Then share your conversation with the larger group.*
4. *Conclude each study session by asking, "what does this study and conversation cause us to pray for?" Then conclude with those prayers.*

### **Introduction**

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*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>8</sup>*

This description of the biblical notion of community is a comprehensive and challenging one, and will be an essential foundation for your church as it looks to the future. 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>9</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

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<sup>8</sup> Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (Harper & Row, 1986), p. 467.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

within the perspective 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 ultimate vision and purpose for human life is at the heart of the Biblical witness. Through study of the biblical witness, 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. As you see your congregation as a participant in this “parade of witnesses” (Hebrews 11) will you faithfully be able to discern and fulfill your calling from God.<sup>10</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**

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”?

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 522.



## Part 1

### The Call of God Embraced

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*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)

This 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. As the "founding ancestor" of the Hebrew faith, Abraham can be viewed as an ideal type, and as such becomes 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, an invitation to abandon the false securities and idolatries of life, and enter a relationship with the One who called him. He responded to the call 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, a word which challenged him to base his life exclusively on faith in God, and to live with his face turned toward the future created by God's promise.<sup>11</sup>

Centuries later, the Apostle Paul, writing to the first Christians in Rome, grounded his understanding of the contrast between

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<sup>11</sup> Frank R. VanDevellder, *The Biblical Journey of Faith: The Road of the Sojourner* (Fortress Press, 1988), p. 96.

justification before God by works or by faith in the account of God's call of Abraham (Rom. 4:1-8). Abraham's pilgrimage, his journey with God, was readily accepted by the early Christians as a guide to their own existence.

**Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. What was the nature of God's call to Abraham? What did God send Abraham to do?

2. How did Abraham respond?

What do you know about Abraham? What can you imagine this call and his response was like?

3. In what ways is God's call and Abraham's response instructive for the church today?

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## Part 2

### The Call of a Witnessing Community

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Our understanding and appreciation of the call of Abraham is seriously limited and distorted if we think of it as the faithfulness of an isolated individual person. Far 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.

Even more dramatic is the cosmic context of the Abraham narratives. The call to Abraham and Sarah has to do not only with the forming of Israel, but with the re-forming of all of creation. Remember, our text does not provide the introduction to the book of Genesis, but comes only in chapter 12.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis paint, with broad strokes and somber tones, a picture of the predicament of the human race upon God's good earth. Within the universe which God created and approved as "very good," human beings, who share in that approval, embark upon a course which leads to fratricide (Gen. 4 – Cain in jealousy kills his brother Abel), great corruption and violence (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>12</sup>

Yet these earlier chapters are also placed within the context of God's call. Genesis 1-11 concerns the affirmation that God calls the world into being to be his faithful world. The entire narrative deals with the tension between God's will for and call to creation and the mixed way in which creation follows that will and answers that call. We can view the whole of Genesis as a reflection upon and witness to God's twofold call:

- the calling into being of the world,
- the calling of a special community to be his witness.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Genesis "is concerned with the gifts given in these calls, the demands announced in them, and the various responses evoked by them."<sup>13</sup> The God who forms the world is the same God who creates Israel. Within this perspective the call of Abraham and Sarah has implications which go far beyond Abraham's personal faith or even the forming of the people of Israel.

The purpose of the call is to fashion an alternative community in creation gone awry, to embody in human history the power of the blessing. 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>14</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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<sup>13</sup> Walter, Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p.1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

## Part 3

The Creative Word of God

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Genesis 12:1-4 is a pivotal text in that it links the traditions of God's providential care for the world and God's electing call of Israel. The history of Israel does not begin in a vacuum, but within the context of the confusion, alienation, scattering, and judgment recounted in the incident of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). The family of Abraham has descended "naturally," as indicated by the genealogies of Gen. 10-11. But that natural evolution results in nothing. Gen. 11:30 quietly states: "Now Sarai was barren; she had no child." 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.

Inexplicably, this God speaks his powerful word directly into a situation of barrenness. This is the ground of the good news. This God does not depend on any potentiality in the one addressed. Abraham and Sarah were quite without potential. The speech of God presumes nothing from the one addressed but carries in itself all that is necessary to begin a new people in history. The power of this summoning word is without analogy. It is a word about the future spoken to this family without any hope of a future. The juxtaposition of the barrenness of Israel and the speech of God is definitional for Israel.<sup>15</sup>

Thus the God who addresses Abraham is a particular God: a God who creates out of nothing. Abraham's God intervenes in the midst of human despair in such a way as to bring about creative hope and new life. Abraham "trusts in a God who can violate religious conventions, shatter normal definitions of reality, and bring about newness."<sup>16</sup> 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).

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

**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?

## Part 4

### The Journey of the People Called

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Abraham and Sarah, in contrast to the resistant, mistrustful world presented in Gen. 1-11, 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 to their own devices. 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.

The history of the people of God from its earliest beginnings is the history of a unique guidance, which is made possible only through the presence of God with his people. It is accompanied by ever fresh promises, directing the eyes of the people toward the future, revealing the future to them.<sup>17</sup>

It is God's presence and God's purpose which provides the motivation and the direction for their journey. The command to "go from..." is immediately followed by God's declaration: "I will...." The fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and Sarah, and through them to the whole of God's people, and through them to all humanity, rests entirely with the one who is speaking. Those who respond to God's call are to live in total reliance upon God.

We can find in the Abraham narrative of Gen. 12:1-4 qualities which 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.

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<sup>17</sup> H.J. Kraus, *The People of God in the Old Testament* (New York: Association Press, 1958), p. 27.

5. The commission: God's people play a key role in the fulfillment of God's redemptive intent for all peoples.

The journey of the people of God is not an aimless wandering but an existence-towards. It is a following of "the way." They are set on the road to a future beyond all their hopes, a future full of promise. As a people responding to God's call, trusting in God's promise, and thereby participating in God's mission, they are "a people who follows the destiny to which God has called them, confident of God's faithfulness to guard and preserve them."<sup>18</sup>

#### **Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. Review the "qualities" of the biblical understanding of community. What strikes you about these qualities? Which one's 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?

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<sup>18</sup> Philip Hefner, "The Church," in *Christian Dogmatics*, Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, eds. (Fortress Press, 1984), p. 213.

## Summary

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We 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 participation 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, an alternative community in a creation gone astray. 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 our 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 an existence-towards. 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.

**Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. To be partners with God in God's mission to the world involves exploring what it means to live in Christian community together. What insights do you gain from the Genesis narrative?

For your personal participation in Christian community?

For the wider life and practice of your congregation?