



**Part of Something Bigger:
An Invitation to Being Part of the People of God**

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

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Introduction: 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 with in a universal order of shalom.

This description of the biblical notion of community is a comprehensive and challenging one, and it 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, nor 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.

The church's mission is to participate in this 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 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.

However, congregations are each unique.

They are unique in how they care for each other.

They are unique in how they worship.

They are unique in their quirky, little activities and programs that they run, like their pie auctions, fall festivals, and white elephant bazaars.

They each have their own set of values, rituals, practices, and preferences, like how they welcome children to participate in worship services, their favorite hymns, or the way they offer Communion.

They are also unique in their budgets, committees, and administrative policies.

Because of all of this, we have a tendency to treat each congregation as independent from everything else. It can seek help and build partnerships, but ultimately it must take responsibility for itself. Just like individual people, it lives or dies, thrives or declines, on its own. It alone is the author of its own success or failure.

To be sure, if congregations are to function they need to attract people and money as well as to have committees, policies, and programs. They also need a vision for why they exist, a clear sense of the impact that they make in the lives of the people who regularly serve in them and who are in the world around them.

Still, for all their uniqueness, congregations are part of something bigger. While disciples of Jesus Christ have organized themselves into local gatherings since the earliest days of the Christian faith, these local gatherings were never meant to be ends in themselves. The Christian faith would not have gotten far if they were! Imagine dozens of little, disconnected groups of believers just trying to raise money and recruit new members within the Roman Empire. If they weren't stamped out by the Romans, they would have quickly failed and fallen into obscurity after just a few years.

Fortunately, the early Christians understood that they were not called to support and grow their own local gatherings. These gatherings were, instead, gateways through which anyone who heard and responded to the teachings of Jesus Christ could become a part of the people of God.

What was true then remains true today. While our congregations may operate independently in distinct contexts, they are all communities that invite us to be part of God's people. Put a little differently: Whatever our congregation's specific, contextual vision, organizational structure, and rituals, worship, and programming are, none of this is meant just for the sake of the success of the congregation itself. Rather, they are all means by which participants can express and share in the work of the people of God within distinct contexts.

Above all, this work is missional. That means that the people of God are not meant to exist for themselves, but to share in the work of God in the world. God has called people to participate in the *missio Dei* (mission of God) from the very beginning.

Through study of the Bible, God's vision can enrich and enlighten the mission of the church 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 as part of this "great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 11:1- 12:3) you will be able faithfully to discern and fulfill your calling from God.

To discern God's calling for your congregation, 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" and your church is part of that people that is distinctly gifted to share its gifts where it is.

The call of Abram and Sarai and their family initiated the entire history of a people called and sent by God. This Bible study offers a glimpse into this through exploring God's calling

to them and considering how that might inform your congregation. Each section includes a short passage of Scripture, a brief meditation that passage, and some reflection questions. We encourage you to work through this Bible study with others in your congregation as you consider how you can shift your focus from just supporting your congregation to inviting your congregation to think of itself as a part of the people of God who are engaged in the mission of God.

Questions for reflection and discussion before starting the study

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 "cloud of witnesses?"
3. What new light does it shed on your approach to the Bible to understand the theme of the Scriptures as "God's calling and sending of a people to participate in God's mission"

Part One: The call of God embraced

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 Abram presents him as the perfectly faithful person. He is called and he goes. He relies solely upon the word of God who has suddenly intervened in his life.

Abram (usually referred to by his later name, 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 early Christians saw Abraham's faithful response to God as a guide to their own understanding of faith.

The faith and obedience of Abraham are also 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 conveyed both promises and commands to him.

However, that does not mean that Abraham did not have to think through his response. There are hints in this passage that what he was doing would require him to embrace significant sacrifice and change his entire pattern of living. We do not know much about this, but we can imagine it based on what God says Abraham's faithfulness will require him to do.

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?
3. What do you know about Abraham? What do you imagine Abraham had to reflect on before answering?
4. In what ways is God's call and Abraham's response instructive for Christians today?
5. What about the idea of God calling would be most exciting for your congregation? What about it would be most concerning? How quickly could your congregation answer the call if God were to appear and declare it?

Part Two: The call of a witnessing community

Far from being the story of a single individual and his journeys, the Abraham narrative is significant because it tells the tale of a *people's* beginnings. God makes Sarah and the rest of Abraham's family central to his calling, claiming that through them all the people of the earth were to be blessed (Genesis 22:17-18). Abraham does not follow God's call alone, but moves together with his family.

In God's calling of Abraham's family, we see more than just the initiation of the people of Israel, but God's plan to restore all of creation. In Genesis 1-11, a picture is painted of the terrible predicament of the human condition upon God's good earth. Humans, who God created "very good," rejected their unique role as God's people in creation and embarked 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 the arrogance of believing they could build a tower to heaven leading to a total break down in communication and the dispersal of the human family across the face of the earth (Gen. 11- Tower of Babel).

On the heels of this progressively worsening story of humanity, we hear God call Abraham and his family in Genesis 12. God steps into human history with a command and a promise that Abraham and his descendants will have the capacity to bless all the nations of the earth. It is the purpose of God that in this new family all human history can be restored to right relationships with God, one another, and all of creation.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Some cultures tend to understand a person's identity as being primarily based on their individual traits. Others see a person's identity as interwoven with the community around them. How would you typify the culture where your congregation is set?
 - a. If your congregation is in a culture that is more individually oriented, how does the idea of God embedding a calling to a specific individual within the calling of an entire people challenge and/or complement your belief about God calling specific individuals?
 - b. If your congregation is in a culture that is more community-oriented, how does the idea that God still requires an individual to answer the call and take personal responsibility to be faithful for it challenge and/or complement your belief about the communal nature of identity?
2. Based on the biblical narrative in Genesis 1-12 that describes creation's perfection and subsequent decline into sin, what do you think God's purpose was for calling a people to be part of God's mission?

Part Three: The creative word of God

Just before God calls Abraham and his family in Gen 12, Gen. 11:30 quietly states: “Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.”

Genesis 11:30 indicates Abraham’s family was seemingly at an end which ran counter to God’s calling. How could someone become a people when he and his wife would be the final generation of their family? Abraham could have easily thought that God’s calling was nonsensical because of this.

However, Abraham was not dissuaded. Whatever questions or uncertainties he may have had, he nonetheless accepted God’s call for him and his nonexistent heirs. It is based on this act of faith that the world would be blessed!

What Abraham understood was that with that God nested a promise within the calling. In calling Abraham and his descendants to be a people who were to carry out God’s mission, God was also guaranteeing that Abraham would have descendants. This promise would take decades to fulfill, but the Bible consistently tells us that Abraham steadfastly believed God’s promise to him and so remained faithful to God’s call. It is this faithfulness that earns him such admiration from later generations.

We can learn at least two lessons from Abraham in this: First, God grants the power to carry out God’s mission to God’s faithful people. We may not know where the resources will come from or how we can humanly accomplish God’s will for us, but as long as we remain faithful to what we know God has called us to do, God will provide. Miraculous provisions always attend faithfulness in mission. This leads us to the second lesson, that God’s call can even come in the midst of our hopelessness. No matter how far-gone or incapable we think we are, God can use us to bring about vast transformation that can bless many people. In fact, it may be a calling to do far more than we think we are able to do that becomes the means God uses to redeem us.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What does that fact that God calls Abraham in the midst of a seemingly hopeless situation tell us about God’s characteristics?
2. “Miraculous provisions always attend faithfulness in missions.” Do you believe this? Would this explanation give us a reason why we do not see many miracles today—because the church is not being faithful in God’s mission?
3. If your congregation believed God would provide whatever was needed at the right time, what missional work would it do right now rather than being held back by lack of resources?
4. Do you have a story of a time that God provided for you when you had no hope of providing for yourself?

Part Four: The journey of the people called

Abraham and Sarah are responsive and receptive to God's call. They fully embrace the call, sacrificing the comforts and certainties of home, and venture forth into the unknown future trusting only in the promises of God. This is why they are such excellent candidates for establishing the people of God.

As they obey God's call, God does not ask them to rely upon their own human reason, practicality, cleverness, logic, or resourcefulness. God journeys with them and promises to provide whatever they may need to participate in God's mission.

This mission entails being faithful to God as they live among other who are quite different from them, and who likely found them odd because their personal situation seemed to contradict how good and powerful they claimed God was. As shown in the encounter between Abraham and the Three Visitors, it this mission even involved praying for God to spare the people who otherwise would dishonor and harm Abraham's family (Genesis 18).

By looking at how God relates to Abraham and Sarah, we can find qualities that are central to the biblical understanding of what it means to be part of the people of God:

1. God takes initiative by speaking a powerful and creative word into a particular and concrete situation that invites participation in mission.
2. There is a communal character to God's call, entailing a whole people being in mission rather than just a few specific individuals.
3. While the call is communal, it also demands individual commitment and faithful obedience.
4. Both individuals and the entire community may have to make sacrifices to participate in God's mission.
5. Nested within the call is the promise that God offers continual provisions to complete the mission.
6. God's people do not live in isolation. They live among other peoples as a witness of God's goodness and as missionaries for the peoples' redemption.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Review the qualities of being a people of God. What strikes you about these qualities?
 - a. Which ones jump out at you personally?
 - b. Which ones speak to your current congregation?
2. What is the value of understanding the church (as a whole, not just individual congregations) as being part of the people of God, meaning that it is an heir to the work God first began through Abraham and Sarah?

Summary

We began with the recognition that the church is not just a set of individual congregations that each care for themselves independently, but is part of the people of God.

God's call to become part of the people of God might be offered at a time of hopelessness. However, God's word does not depend on the abilities of the individuals addressed but carries with it the promise that God sustains God's people by empowering them with all they need to be faithful and effective in God's mission. This even includes God making things possible that are otherwise impossible.

However, to receive this provision often requires us to give up the things that make us comfortable and give us some sense of control. It is only as we give ourselves fully in faithfulness to God's mission that we see God's miraculous power unleashed. This does not mean giving up our distinctiveness as a congregation, but remembering that our congregation does not exist for itself but as a participant in God's people for God's mission.

This means that the spiritual journey of each congregation is not an aimless wandering but a purposeful journey. It involves discerning the call to understand itself as part of something bigger and being set on the road to a future full of promise in which it works for the redemption of the peoples in its specific context. Doing this involves faithful trust in God's promises and active participation in God's mission.

The experience of Abraham and Sarah, then, 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, shedding their old identities, and becoming the people of God. Starting with Abraham and Sarah, God brought into being a special people to be God's witness, God's own community in a creation gone awry. Through this new people, God continues to bring the whole creation into unity and harmony - shalom - with God. And, if we will accept, our congregation is part of that people.

Questions for reflection and discussion

Let's do some basic planning! Based on this understanding of the congregation, answer the following questions for a) you personally and for b) your congregation:

1. Where do you hear God calling you?
2. How might you partner with other Christians (perhaps from other congregations) to help you live into that calling?
3. What will you need to sacrifice to live into the calling?
4. Who are the peoples you will be a witness to by praying and living in a way that God might redeem them?
5. What will you need God to provide so that you can be effective as a people who are participating in God's mission?