

#8. Peace and mutual Edification (23/06/24)

Reading: Romans 14:1-23

1. Sarah read some recent news articles about Christianity in the media. How do you think the world outside the church sees Christianity? What can we do to change the misconceptions?
2. Paul refers to “disputable matters” in verse 1. How do we know which matters are disputable and which are not? (Do the ancient creeds cover it? Nicene Creed (anglicancommunion.org))
3. In verses 5-9 Paul discusses some issues about which Christians in Rome disagreed. Can you think of any issues on which you disagree with a Christian friend? How do you feel about that? Does understanding your friend’s position/reasoning help?
4. Can something be wrong/sinful for one person and not sinful for another?
5. In Verse 5, Paul says that “each of them must be fully convinced in their own mind”. Can you think of a time when God has prompted you by using your conscience? Can we always trust our conscience?
6. Verse 23 says “everything that does not come from faith is sin.” What does this mean? The Amplified Bible says “whatever is done with doubt is sinful”. Does that help?
7. Read verses 13-21. What do you think of the idea that we might need to change our behaviour for the sake of another Christian (perhaps from a different culture) and for the sake of church unity?
8. How difficult is it not to focus on being right, but to put being loving first?
 - a. Would you be able to say honestly, “It is not important for me to be right?”
9. Verse 19 says “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification.” How can we do this?
10. Is the church today united? In what ways has this improved over time? What can we do to improve it further?
11. Verse 17 says “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” What is the kingdom of God about for you? How can we change the conversation to this rather than the “disputable matters” the world wants to discuss?

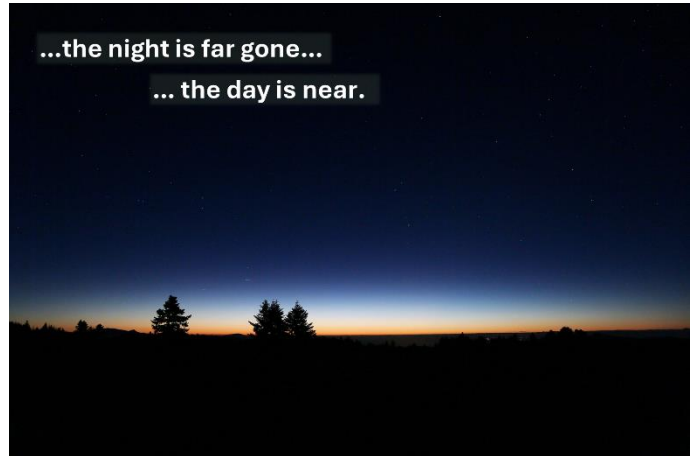
#7. Put on Jesus Christ! (09/06/24)

Reading: Romans 13:11-14

1. How good are you in the mornings? How easy do you find it to wake up? Are you like me, and really struggle, or are you instantly awake and ready for the day? Does the reason you are getting up make a difference?
2. Read Romans 13:11-14. What is the reason Paul gives as to why we must wake from sleep?
 - a. Salvation has been accomplished – all that needed to be done has been done. How does that make you feel?
3. Paul writes that “Salvation is nearer than it was” rather than “Salvation is here” and also that “the night is far gone, the day is near”. What do you think Paul means by these phrases?
 - a. It might help to consider the more often used phrase, “living in the now and the not yet”

Although the new day has begun, the sun is not high in the sky yet – the darkness remains with us even if the new light is breaking in. Those who follow Jesus are called to wake up and live already according to the expectations of the age to come (the new day). Let’s look at these expectations.

4. Continuing the daytime/nighttime imagery, Paul uses the imagery of clothing (as once we wake up, we must get dressed). Paul’s question to us is, “what clothes are you going to put on?” and the answer he provides is in two parts
 - a. Laying aside the clothes / deeds of darkness
 - b. Putting on the armour of light / Putting on Jesus Christ
 - i. What do you think Paul means by these two phrases?
 - ii. What might be the deeds of darkness (some of Paul’s examples are in verse 13)?
5. In laying aside the deeds of darkness, Paul calls us to take sin seriously, and in verse 14 writes, “make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires”.
 - a. Richard used the illustration of the 5-second rule regarding eating food off the floor (it is fine to eat food off the floor if it has been there less than 5 seconds) and asked whether this could be applied to sin – a little sin is fine, a sinful thought if only brief is alright, a rarely shared unkind or thoughtless word is no real harm. What do you think about this rule?
 - b. Richard said, “5 seconds is enough, a hesitancy to rid ourselves of a sinful thought or idea is often sufficient to become ensnared by it” – it might be difficult to talk about but consider for yourself, is this something you have experienced? I know I have.
6. The correct clothing for daytime is Jesus Christ himself (the armour of light). Paul writes using this imagery elsewhere:
 - a. Eph 5:8, “For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of the light.”
 - b. 1 Thess 5:5, “For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness.”
 - i. What do you think of these images?
7. What do you think putting on Jesus Christ looks like, in daily life? How might we actively do this?
 - a. Consider the options of reading passages from the gospels and asking, “What is Jesus like here?”
 - b. Or maybe remembering the actions and words of baptism and their significance.
 - c. How do we respond to God’s love through putting on Jesus Christ?
 - i. Loving God & loving others
 - ii. What does this type of love look like?
8. You may want to use the images (which Richard used in the talk) on the next page to aid conversation and discussion.



#6. Submitting to authority or not! (02/06/24)

Reading: Romans 13:1-5

Dietrich Bonhoeffer. "We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself."

Martin Luther King Jr. "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

Desmond Tutu. "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality."

1. Keith, especially in the way he initiated his talk (by juxtaposing verses from Romans 13 with examples/images of their misuse), was being intentionally provocative/challenging.
 - a. How did you respond to the talk initially? What was your gut reaction?
 - b. How on reflection/after some time what is your response?
 - c. What questions do you have?
2. What do you think the key points of Keith's talk were? (1. Misuse/Abuse of these verses [read in isolation] can lead to a misuse/abuse of power. 2. Jesus is King, and He is the ultimate authority. 3. It is from Jesus we define right and wrong, not from any other authority. 4. When authority punishes those doing right and does not punish those doing wrong [or it enables, or is, the wrong doer], we no longer have to submit to them. 5. Pray for our politicians and political parties. 6. Get involved in politics.)
3. If you had only heard the first half of Keith's talk what would have been the main thrust of his message? (That Romans 13 & God condemn those who rebel against God's appointed authority, even if those who rebel are right.)
 - a. If you listen to all of Keith's talk you get a different, fuller, idea of what his talk is about (Q2). To get the full (and correct) message of Keith's talk, you have to put the first half of it into the wider context of the whole talk. The same goes for reading Romans 13. It cannot be read (or used) in isolation. Keith intentionally only referred to Romans 13:1-5 (as those in power who choose to misuse it do), but by looking at these verses in their context we get a fuller understanding of Paul's message. Read Chapter 12 and the rest of Chapter 13 (esp v 10-18). How do these texts change your view of Romans 13:1-5?
 - b. If you listen to not only Keith's talk, but set it in the context of the whole service, with Katie's prayer, the words from the worship sung, etc, you get an even fuller perspective, which helps us place what Keith shared in its correct context. Similarly, if you put Romans 13 in the fuller context of the Biblical narrative, of the life/words of Jesus, etc, you get an even fuller perspective.
 - i. Where in the OT and NT do we find the misuse of authority (religious or secular) rightly challenged by champions and prophets of the faith?
 - ii. Where in the Gospels do we see Jesus challenge (religious) authorities?
 - iii. What bits of Scripture would you use to challenge a use of Romans 13:1-5 that upholds unjust and immoral use of authority?
4. Read the quotes from Bonhoeffer, King and Tutu, remembering that all 3 were Christians of deep faith, church leaders, and leaders of movements that challenged unjust and immoral authorities:
 - i. What is your personal response to these quotes?
 - ii. How are you challenged by them (the quotes and the men)?
 - iii. How do these quotes, and the life-work of these 3 men, square with Romans 13:1-5?
 - iv. Can you recognise parts of Scripture (whether a Book, event, account, chapter, verse) that resonate with any of the 3 quotes.
5. When considering such things like oppression and unjust authorities, we have a tendency to align ourselves with the oppressed. But, (especially if we consider Bonhoeffer's and Tutu's quotes) are there ways in which we could be (unwittingly) supporting an injustice, or colluding with an unjust authority?
 - a. If so, how do we redress this?
6. Visit and read the CofE website's General Election page. Consider signing up for the 21 day **Pray Your Part**, starting on the 14th of June to Election Day.
<https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/general-election-2024-invitation-pray-nation>
7. Between now and the election get genned up; read the papers (from the left and the right); read all the manifestos; etc. (Keith recommends the BBC Sounds Podcast called **Newscast**
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/series/p05299nl>)
8. **Vote.**

#5. The result of being grafted in is to display the marks of Christianity (26/05/24)

Reading: Romans 12:9-21

1. There are many good people who do not profess to be Christian who exhibit some of the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit. We only have to think back to the early days of the pandemic and to Lockdown to bring these to mind. God made mankind in His image so it should not be a surprise to discover His characteristics in those outside the faith (consider motivation, ego, altruism, reward).
 - a. What makes the Christian life distinctively different from someone of no faith?
 - b. What is the Good News in this?

2. Application of the fruit of the spirit in the Christian life. Compare Romans 12:9–21 with Galatians 5:22, 23 **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...**
 - a. Which characteristic of the fruit of the spirit will help in following Paul's instructions for a distinctive Christian life? You could go through the Romans passage and discuss which characteristic best connects with it.

3. When Jesus taught the people, He spoke in parables and used many illustrations relevant to the people of His time. Thelma used a number of pictures or analogies in her talk. Which of them resonated with you? Which have stuck with you and have you found particularly helpful?
 - a) Just as solar power harvests energy from the sun turning it into the power we can use, Jesus gives his followers a vision of Christian living that is charged with the energy of the presence of God on the inside.
 - b) Imagine the fruit of the Spirit as an orange. This is one fruit but inside it is made up of many segments. Segments are the 9 characteristics of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control..." Just as you need to peel the orange to discover its potential, so we acknowledge we have these characteristics already when we are filled with His Holy Spirit and use them to overcome the challenges.
 - c) Fruit that will last – the pips or seeds in the orange segments that go on to reproduce more oranges exactly as God designed them to do. Can you think of examples of 'fruit that will last' or of the application of the fruit of the spirit that goes on to reproduce itself naturally. Maybe you know of someone who became a Christian because of you. Consider the natural multiplication of the gospel – "One shall tell another, and he shall tell his friend. Husbands, wives, and children shall come following on. From house to house in families shall more be gathered in and lights will shine in every street so warm and welcoming" Graham Kendrick 1981 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn_xKjk0yBc
 - d) Exercise is good for you..... we exercise muscles to strengthen them – the challenges we encounter are opportunities for us to acknowledge we already have the characteristic required and to exercise it by application. Think and share examples of this.
 - e) Cart before the horse. Jesus's yoke. Burden light. Was this helpful in reflecting on how we perceive the rules for living a Christian life? What comes first? What is the source?
 - f) Staying connected to Jesus and His Holy Spirit who becomes like the sap in the tree, like the life force in each cell. We don't hear the flowers and plants all around us straining to grow, they just grow.

Scriptures used in the talk:

- John 15:16 NIV. *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last".*
- Amplified version of 1 Corinthians 12:4 explains *"there are distinctive varieties of special abilities given by the grace and extraordinary power of the Holy Spirit operating in believers, but it is the same Spirit who grants them and empowers believers".*

- Galatians 5: 22 and 23. *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...*
- *“A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”* (John 13:33-35).
- Matthew 11:28 Jesus said *“Come to me all you are heavy laden and I will give you rest for your souls”*.
- New Living Translation of Ephesians 2:8: *God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God.*
- 1 John 4:19 *We love God because He first loved us.*
- Philippians 2:13 *“For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.”*

#4. The result of being grafted in is to use the gifts that God has given to you (12/05/24)

Reading: Romans 12:3-8

Whilst the focus of the talk on Sunday 12th May was on verses 3-8, it is always good to see any given passage in its context and in this case, the wider context would include reading verses 1-2 of Romans 12. (Verses 9 onwards are also related, and the penultimate questions sneaks into v 9!)

Chapter 12 v 3 onwards (and in this particular case v 3-8) is concerned with the practical outworkings of Paul's urgent call in v 2 for followers of Jesus 'to be transformed by the renewing of your mind'. We are a new creation with a new focus in life. His letter helps us to see what that might mean in practice.

1. V3 - How do you think of yourself? In this modern age of social media, do you aim to have lots of 'followers'? How do you think Jesus saw himself? Read Matthew 20 v 20 -28 – what lessons can we draw from this?
2. Paul is adamant that we are 'one body, and each member belongs to all the others' (v 4-5). Do you see yourself as part of 'one body'? How would you describe that body? In a world that prizes individualism, how important is it to be a part of a larger whole? Does being part of a wider body bring with it individual responsibilities? If so, what would these be?
3. Paul says that 'each member belongs to all the others' Do you feel a sense of belonging? Does it encourage you to see yourself as part of a larger whole? How can we help others to believe that they too 'belong'?
4. Paul indicates that we each have gifts that we can 'bring to the party', and implies that the body as a whole will function better when we use them. The list in v 6-8 is not exclusive, with the main point being that each of us has a role to play. Do you think these gifts are solely for church use, or in the wider society and web of relationships that we find ourselves in? What do you think are your gifts? Are you putting them to use? If you haven't thought about it before, how would you go about discovering your God-given gifts?
5. Straying a little into the surrounding context, what two things should underly our exercise of these gifts (12 v 1 and 12. v9) (ie self-sacrifice to honour God; and love of one another) Do you think this is this a practical outworking of the two Great Commandments in Mathew 22 v 35-40?
6. What have you learnt from the talk on Sunday and discussing this passage in Romans 12 3-8? What are you still unclear about?

#3. Living Sacrifices and Be Transformed (05/05/24)

Readings: Romans 11:33 – 12:2

1. In Romans Chapter 11:33-36 Paul recognises who God is, his nature, and then gives praise to God for being these things (a doxology – worship).
 - a. Read the passage and discuss your thoughts on Paul’s two declarations (v33) and his two questions (vv34-35)
 - b. These phrases all highlight one thing – the difference between God and people. What differences can you think of between us and God?
2. Richard said, “it is exactly God’s incomprehensibility that is the basis for Paul’s trust in God. We can put our trust in God because he is so vastly and incomprehensibly different from human failings.”
 - a. What do you think of this statement? How easy do you find it to trust God?

Paul introduces the first “as a result...” phrase of being part of the God-cultivated Olive Tree (God’s family) and it is in two parts which we will look at in turn.

Present your bodies as living sacrifices

1. The Greeks at the time of this letter would have been shocked by Paul discussing the importance of the body. They considered the body to be an embarrassment and burden; a tomb to escape from. But this is not the Christian view of the body.
 - a. Why do you think the body is important to God?
 - b. Do we struggle to think of our bodies as important? Why might this be?
2. The imagery of sacrifice is intense, it signifies the total giving of our bodies; not keeping anything back. But Richard said there is a difference, “unlike the sacrifices which were killed upon the altar, it is upon giving our lives wholly to God that we become truly alive – as we give our bodies and lives to God we receive new life from God, through his Spirit which makes us more alive than we can possibly imagine.”
 - a. What do you think of this statement and about becoming alive upon the altar?
 - b. Richard said that our bodies are a barometer of our attitudes – they reveal and display what is going on inside. How might this work and what does it look like?
 - i. If you watch the YouTube video Richard used two descriptions of how our bodies might reveal what is going on inside (if you can re-watch this 48:29 – 50:00). What do you think about these descriptions?

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind

1. God does not only ask for our bodies but also our minds. It is not just what we do that is important but how we think. For it is from our thoughts and attitudes that our deeds grow. What we feed our mind with comes out in our words and behaviours.
 - a. Think about what this means using the “Carnation Experiment” illustration (image on next page)
 - b. What do you “feed upon”? What do you nourish yourself with? What do you draw up into your petals?
2. Read Philippians 4:8-9. What encouragement does this give us to think and do? Share your thoughts.

Natural Imitators

1. We, as people, are natural imitators; looking for a model to follow, to copy. Paul says there are only two to choose from. The Present Age (this world, this age) & The Age to Come and that the two models are founded on such different principles that there is no compromise between them. As branches of the Olive Tree, we are called to “not conform” to this world, this present age but to live by what God in his mercy has done for us (the age to come). Paul writes that this requires transformation, but what does he mean?
 - a. What do you think of when you hear “transformation”? Transformers or Butterflies? (images on next page)
 - i. One is a rearrangement of parts but not much has changed really, the other is a total and whole transformation into something radically new. Discuss these differences.
 - b. This transformation is dependent on what we feed ourselves – The Spirit and the Word
 - i. How good are we at feeding ourselves in this way?

The Reason

1. The reason for all of this is found at the end of 12:2, “so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect”.
 - a. Where would you like to know God’s will? Share this in your group and then spend some time praying together to hear God’s will for you in your lives.
 - b. You may want to end by sharing the blessing that Richard used at the end of the service which recognises the importance of our bodies and our minds.

Jesus, bless their feet, may they bring good news.

Bless their legs, may they carry on in times of suffering.

Bless their backs, may they be strong enough to bear the burdens of others.

Bless their arms to hold the lonely, and their hands to do good work.

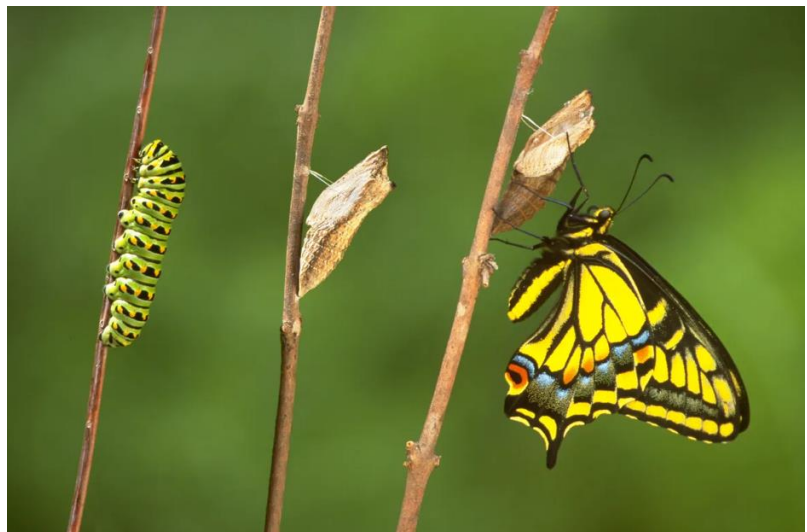
Bless their necks, may they turn their heads toward the poor.

Bless their ears to discern truth, their eyes to see beauty, and their mouths to speak encouragement.

Bless their minds, may they grow wise in their knowledge of you.

And finally, bless their hearts, may they grow to love you — and all that you have made — in the right order.

Amen.



#2. The Olive Tree (14/04/24)

Readings: Romans 11:17-24 (Romans 9:30-33, 10:1-4, 9-13)

1. Read Romans 9:30-33. It was clear that Paul felt that many thought that to receive God's salvation they needed to work for it; in some way to earn it.
 - a. In what (subtle) ways can we make it about what we do, rather than what Jesus has already done for us?
 - b. Our faith in Jesus, if real, should make a real difference to how we live our lives. How can the outward expression of this, become about works, rather than about faith?
 - c. What do you do to ensure that your relationship with God is about your faith in his Son, rather than your achievements or failures?
2. Read 10:1-4 and 9-13. Here Paul argues that salvation can't be achieved through the law, but only through faith in Jesus.
 - a. How do you understand 10:4?
 - b. How do you understand 10:9?
 - c. What are the perceived challenges today of speaking of the faith we have in Jesus (10:10)? What has been your own experience of doing so?
3. Keith said that 'God is inclusive' and that access to Him is not limited by ethnicity, gender, age, culture, etc.
 - a. How do you understand the inclusivity of God?
 - b. What are the 'limits' to God's inclusivity? (10:12b-13)
4. Read 11:22. In your routine prayers and thinking are you more likely to consider the kindness or sternness of God?
 - a. If there is an imbalance in your thinking about God, where does it originate, and what are the issues with being in relationship with only a God who is kind, or stern.
5. The olive tree is a very striking metaphor for our spiritual relationship with God. Imagining your own relationship with God as an olive tree (or a branch on the tree).
 - a. How healthy looking is your branch?
 - b. In what ways is it connected to the trunk and roots?
 - c. How is it routinely fed by the nourishing sap fed from the roots?
6. In Paul's time the established natural branches were the Jews. Today, after 2000+ years of Christianity we are the established branches, and even the trunk which feeds newly grafted branches nourishment from the tree roots.
 - a. How are we ensuring that others (newbies who may be appear different from us) can be readily grafted on?
 - b. How do we ensure that we who are established continue to receive from the roots of our faith so that we grow and don't become smug or complacent?
 - c. How do we ensure that newbies are able to grow and be nourished?

#1. The Olive Tree – Introduction (07/04/24, Richard Saint)

Readings: Romans 9:6-16, 25-26

1. Before we embark on Part 2 of our tour of Romans, cast your mind back to April 2023 to Part One. We examined together topics like, Justification, Sanctification, Our Adoption, Our Humanity, New Family, Reality, Status, Comfort, and new life.
 - a. What, if anything, has stayed with you from that series? Has anything been particularly impactful to you?
2. Richard re-introduced Paul's overarching theme, and driving force, of the letter to the Romans – The Gospel, The Good News.
 - a. How would you describe or explain the Good News to someone?
3. Paul writes, (Rm 1:16), "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for **it is the power of God** for **salvation to everyone who believes.**"
 - a. What do you think of Paul's description?
You may want to split it into the three parts (highlighted above).

This week, we are particularly celebrating in the word, "everyone". This understanding of who salvation was for, was a massive shift from what had previously been understood.

In this passage from Romans, Paul first introduces the idea of God's narrowing, before opening the idea of God's expansion plan.

4. God's narrowing relates to the fact that being "God's chosen people" was never an automatically inherited condition, it isn't something hereditary. It was always about God's choice. God chose Abraham, God chose Isaac, God chose Jacob. Not because they were deserving, or the best, brightest, strongest, or most numerous. Just simply God's choice. What do you think of this?

One thing to remember is that it is not that God loved *only* his chosen people. It is not to do with love or hate (these words from the passage relate to contrasts rather than absolutes). We know God loves all his creation. It is to do with being set apart for a special purpose. God's chosen people were set apart for a special purpose (not that they always achieved this). You may want to take some time to discuss this and think this through.

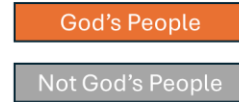
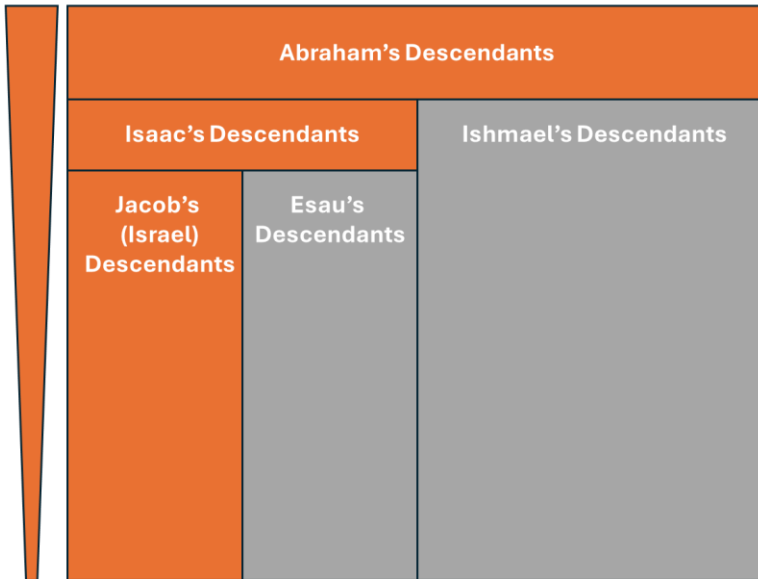
5. God's expansion plan was visible (if not enacted) even at the time of Abraham. Paul writes (Gal 3:6-9), "Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith." God was always going to include Gentiles in his salvation plan.
 - a. What do you think about the fact that God's plan of salvation is now available to all?
 - b. Take some time to thank God and praise him for his choice and plan of inclusion, making his invitation to accept salvation available to all.

Richard finished by introducing the "Casual Conjunctive Adverbial" – words that link an action to the cause for that action (Consequently... As a result... Therefore... Accordingly...)

Richard's point was that the choice to follow Jesus, to accept God's plan of salvation includes a casual conjunctive adverbial, there is a consequence of that choice. These consequences are what we will be looking at over this series.

6. Take some time to think about, and share with each other, what you consider some of the consequence of following might be.
7. The choice to follow is not the end, it is only the beginning. What comes next is the call to discipleship. "What follows the choice is the decision to follow where God leads."
 - a. What do you think of this statement describing discipleship?

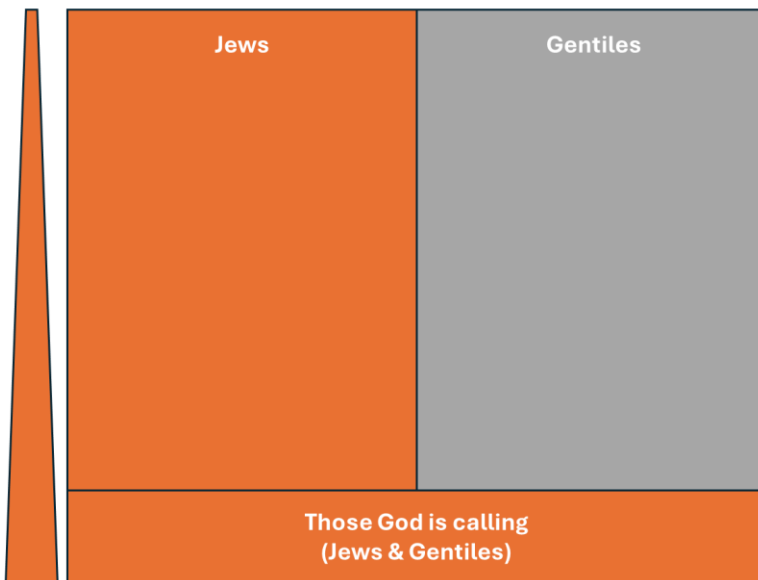
God's Narrowing



Rm 9:6-7

For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham simply because they are his offspring, but “through Isaac shall your offspring be named.”

God's Expansion Plan



Rm 9:24-26

including us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? As indeed he says in Hosea, “Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’” “And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they shall be called children of the living God.”