

Replacement Theology: Its Origins, Teachings and Errors

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These are challenging and confusing times. With all the numerous and varied "winds of doctrine" that are blowing around us these days, many find it difficult to discern the difference between truth and error. One error frequently encountered is Replacement Theology. Actually, it's nothing new: in fact, it's been around for centuries. Some of its roots are traceable to the writings of some of the Early "Church" fathers. And even today, oddly enough, this pernicious error is taught as a fact in many Bible colleges and seminaries worldwide. So let me ask you - how much do you know about Replacement Theology? If you were called upon to refute it, could you?

Definition

Replacement Theology - reduced to its simplest form - teaches that the Church has replaced Israel in YHVH's plan. The term "Replacement Theology" is relatively new and unfamiliar to many people (in some cases, even those who believe in it). Among theologians, the older and more widely used term is "supersessionism." The Church "supersedes" Israel. Its proponents teach that YHVH has set aside Israel and made the Church "new Israel," the new and improved people of YHVH. There are many variations within the broad spectrum of Replacement Theology, but two of the main approaches are these:

1. Israel's role as the people of YHVH was completed (economic supersessionism). This is the kinder and gentler way of stating the basic thesis of Replacement Theology. It says that once the Messiah came 2,000 years ago, Israel's mission was completed. A transition occurred at that point, and the Church took over as the people of YHVH and became the focal point for the outworking of YHVH's plan and purpose in redemption. YHVH is no longer working administratively through ethnic Israel.
2. Israel's place as the people of YHVH was forfeited (punitive supersessionism). Other Replacement theologians are more straightforward and actually say that the supposed replacement of Israel was a divine judgment on the nation for its rejection of the Messiah in the first century. This is what some writers have called "punitive secessionism."

Perhaps Martin Luther articulated this position most eloquently when he wrote: "For such ruthless wrath of YHVH is sufficient evidence that they [i.e., the Jewish people] assuredly have erred and gone astray. Even a child can comprehend this. For one dare not regard YHVH as so cruel that he would punish his own people so long, so terrible, so unmercifully ... Therefore this work of wrath is proof that the Jews, surely rejected by YHVH, are no longer his people, and neither is he any longer their YHVH" ("On the Jews and Their Lies," Trans. Martin H. Bertram, in *Luther's Works* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971], p. 265).

Common threads that weave their way through the numerous variations of supersessionism are (1) that YHVH is finished with Israel as a nation, and (2) that the promises He made to Israel in the Old Testament have been inherited by the Church. (However, most Replacement theologians are reluctant to say that the Church - which is largely in apostasy today - has also inherited the curses and judgments that YHVH pronounced on Israel for her apostasy.)

One defender of Replacement Theology writes: "The Jewish nation no longer has a place as the special people of YHVH; that place has been taken by the Christian community which fulfills YHVH's purpose for Israel" (Bruce Waltke, "Kingdom Promises as Spiritual," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Testaments*, Ed. John S. Feinberg [Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 1987] p. 275). This is how one evangelical theologian summarized the essence of supersessionism in a paper he presented at the Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting a few years ago: "The issue is whether national Israel as an administrative structure is still in the plan of YHVH" ("A Future for Israel in Covenant Theology: The Untold Story" by R. Todd Mangum, Instructor in Historical and Systematic Theology at Biblical Theological Seminary in Hatfield, Pennsylvania [November 16, 2000], p. 20).

Theological Basis

Replacement Theology is closely associated with Reformed (or Covenant) Theology, the brand of theology historically linked to John Calvin (1509-1564) and the Protestant Reformation. Reformed/Covenant Theology, in turn, is closely associated with amillennialism, an eschatological view with a spiritualized (rather than literal-historical) interpretation of the prophetic Scriptures. The natural affinity these views (that is, Replacement Theology and amillennialism) seem to have for each other is understandable because Replacement Theology relies so heavily on a non-literal and allegorical interpretation of the biblical promises to Israel.

Although many of the early Reformers and Puritans - including even Calvin himself - wrote about the nation of Israel one day being restored by the grace of YHVH and experiencing a national regeneration, that is an increasingly marginalized, minority view in Reformed Christianity today (which is ironic, since we have seen the amazing rebirth of the nation of Israel, just as the Word of YHVH predicted!). And even among those who allow for an end-time work of the Spirit of YHVH among the Jewish people, there is still a reluctance to acknowledge that YHVH is not finished with His people Israel as a nation, or to acknowledge the prospect of a future Kingdom on the Earth. This view stands in contrast to the teachings of Dispensational Premillennialism, which affirms the continuing role that Israel plays (in tandem with the Church) in the outworking of YHVH's plan of redemption.

Historical Roots

Elements of Replacement Theology can be traced as far back as Marcion (A.D. 160), who carried on a theological crusade to purge the Church of what he perceived to be dangerous Jewish errors and influences. Later, many of these same anti-Judaic sentiments found their way into the thinking (and writings) of the Early Church fathers. Irenaeus (c. 180), for instance, wrote, *"The Jews have rejected the Son of YHVH and cast Him out of the vineyard when they slew Him. Therefore, YHVH has justly rejected them and has given to the Gentiles outside the vineyard the fruits of its cultivation"* (The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, [1885-1887], Volume 1, p. 493).

Over time, statements like these became the basis for full-blown anti-Semitism in some sectors of Christianity. Anything Jewish was renounced as an attempt to subvert and "Judaize" the Church. Teachings like chiliasm (millenarianism), for instance, were denounced as "Jewish fables." The Early Church, which was clearly and undeniably Jewish, was described as "primitive," unenlightened, and beset by erroneous notions that were carry-overs from ancient Judaism.

By the seventh century, Jewish people who came to faith in the Messiah were required to denounce their Jewish ancestry and heritage before they could be baptized. Professor Paul Halsall of Fordham University cites the following Visigoth profession from c. A.D. 680-687: *"I do here and now renounce every rite and observance of the Jewish religion, detesting all its most solemn ceremonies and tenets that in former days I kept and held. In future I will practice no rite or celebration connected with it, nor any custom of my past error, promising neither to seek it out or perform it. In the name of this Creed, which I truly believe and hold with all my heart, I promise that I will never return to the vomit of Jewish superstition. Never again will I fulfill any of the offices of Jewish ceremonies to which I was addicted, nor ever more hold them dear. I altogether deny and reject the errors of the Jewish religion, casting forth whatever conflicts with the Christian Faith, and affirming that my belief in the Holy Trinity is strong enough to make me live the truly Christian life, shun all intercourse with other Jews and have the circle of my friends only among honest Christians. With them or apart from them I must always eat Christian food, and as a genuinely devout Christian go often and reverently to Church. I promise also to maintain and embrace with due love and reverence the observance of all the Lord's days or feasts for martyrs as declared by the piety of the Church, and upon those days to consort always with sincere Christians, as it behooves a pious and sincere Christian to do. Herewith is my profession of faith and belief as given by me on this date ..."* ("Professions of Faith Extracted from Jews on Baptism," from the Internet Medieval Sourcebook compiled by Professor Paul Halsall of Fordham University [www.fordham.edu/halsall/sources/jewish-oaths.html]).

The incredible irony here is that only a few centuries earlier, the Church had been almost exclusively Jewish! The Messiah was Jewish; the writers of the Bible were Jewish; the apostles were Jewish; the earliest Christians were Jewish; the first congregation was Jewish (located in Jerusalem); and the first missionaries were Jewish! In fact, a council of Church leaders - including Paul, Barnabas, Peter and James - was convened at Jerusalem (Acts 15) so the leaders of the new and growing Messianic Movement (known first as "the sect of the Nazarenes," Acts 24:5) could decide upon what conditions non-Jews would be admitted into the fellowship of the saints! But here, within just a few generations, the shoe was already on the other foot! Non-Jews were in control of the Church now. Jewish doctrines (the earthly Kingdom in particular) were considered erroneous and even seditious. And non-Jewish Church leaders were laying down the terms for Jewish believers in Jesus who wished to be baptized.

Exegetical Problems with Supersessionism

Did the sins of the Jewish nation result in her rejection? Paul's answer is found in Romans 11: I say then, has YHVH cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. YHVH has not cast away his people whom He foreknew (vv. 1-2, NKJV). I say then, have they [Israel] stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles. Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness! (vv. 11-12, NKJV). For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? (v. 15, NKJV).

If the Jewish nation has no future in YHVH's plan, as the supersessionists claim, then what is the future "fullness" of Israel that Paul mentions in verse 12? And when, exactly, will the nation be resurrected ("life from the dead") and "accepted" by YHVH (verse 15)? Paul can't be talking about the Church in this passage because the Church has never died - and never will (John 11:26). The only reasonable answer is that Paul is referring to a yet-future resurrection and restoration of Am Israel (the "people of Israel," a collective term for the nation), as prophesied in passages like Ezekiel 37:1-14. It doesn't mean they will automatically be saved simply because they are Jewish; rather, it means that the majority of Jewish people who are living at that time will recognize Yeshua of Nazareth as their Messiah and receive Him as Savior (Zechariah 12:10, Romans 11:26).

They will be saved in the same way believers from all ages and generations have been saved; that is, they will be saved by grace, through faith (Eph. 2:8-10). The problem with saying that YHVH rejected His people Israel is that the term "rejection" implies permanence and finality. Paul's forceful statements in Romans 11 probably indicate that people were claiming, even in his day, that YHVH had "cast away" His people Israel (v. 1). They were saying that Israel had "stumbled" and "fallen" from her former position (vv. 11-12). Paul rejected any such notion ("Certainly not!" in verses 1 and 11). Then he goes on to say that even if we insist on saying that they were rejected, then we are forced to the conclusion that the rejection is only temporary. Even if we insist on saying that they did stumble and fall, then it must also be said that their fall brought salvation to the rest of the world (Gentiles) - and Israel's fall, too, is only temporary because they are destined to be restored one day to a position of "fullness" (v. 12).

The "fullness of the Gentiles" (Rom. 11:25) refers to the time when the full number of non-Jewish believers has been added to the ranks of the Family and the last person has been saved. Likewise, the "fullness" of the Jewish people (v. 12) refers to the time when "all Israel shall be saved" (v. 26). As we saw earlier, that means the Jewish people en masse will recognize and receive their Messiah, Yeshua of Nazareth. There may be some dissenters - and their probably will be - but the Spirit of YHVH will do a powerful work among the Jewish people, and multitudes of them - the vast majority of them - will come to faith in the Messiah of Israel, Yeshua of Nazareth.

The truth is that YHVH is no more finished with Israel than He is finished with the Gentiles. Neither one has been replaced by the other; and YHVH's plan for both remains intact, in spite of their failures. This is really the crux of the issue. Replacement Theology says that Israel was rejected by YHVH and that the rejection was permanent and irrevocable; however, we say that YHVH's calling on Israel was permanent and irrevocable, in spite of her many sins and shortcomings (Romans 11:29).

What Did the Apostles Believe About the Millennium?

Another problem for supersessionism and amillennialism is that these views are not in harmony with the teachings of the Apostles and the Early Church. Almost without exception, Church historians agree that chiliasm, an early form of premillennialism, was the position of the Early (Jewish) Church. In his classic, encyclopedic History of the Christian Church, Philip Schaff wrote, "The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene Age [A.D. 100-325] is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, ... a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers, such as Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Methodius, and Lactantius ..." (Scribner, 1884; Vol. 2, p. 614).

What's interesting about this admission is that it comes from someone who was neither evangelical nor premillennial. Schaff, in fact, was himself an ardent supersessionist! He wrote, "*The carnal Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament is a diabolical perversion. The Christians, and not the Jews, are the true Israel of YHVH and the righteous owners of the Old Testament Scriptures*" (Ibid., Sec. 167, "Barnabas"). Yet as a student of history and as a scholar, he had to acknowledge that chiliasm was "prominent" in the Early Church, even though he despised it.

It should be noted that Papias (who believed in a future, earthly Kingdom) was a disciple of Polycarp, who in turn was a disciple of the Apostle John who actually penned the passages in the Book of Revelation about the Millennial Kingdom. Premillennialism, then, may be the only eschatological system with an unbroken link directly to the author of the Apocalypse. This means that amillennialism represents a departure from what the Early Church believed. Augustine (354-430), author of City of YHVH, a 22-volume defense of his theological views, proposed ideas similar to what we know as amillennialism (Books 15 to 19). However, even Augustine started out as a premillennialist! It wasn't until later in his life that he decided that the prophecies about (and promises to) Israel should be interpreted symbolically and applied to the Church, rather than being interpreted literally and applied to Israel.

The Sticking Point: Messiah's Millennial Monarchy

Evangelicals have been busy for years trying to hammer out an understanding between premillennial dispensationalists and adherents of Reformed/Covenant Theology. Dispensationalists who have been actively pursuing this agenda (and making concessions to the opposing view) are known as "progressive dispensationalists." The one point, however, that continues to be a fly in the ointment of reconciliation is the Millennial Kingdom. Even Covenant theologians who allow for an end-time mass conversion of the Jewish people still have difficulty accepting Israel's role in a future, literal Kingdom on the Earth. This shows just how diverse amillennialism

and premillennialism are and how difficult it is to bridge the gap between them without seriously compromising one or the other.

Why Is This Error Dangerous?

Is Replacement Theology really worth arguing about? Or is this discussion much ado about nothing? One reason it's important to call attention to questionable theology, no matter how deeply entrenched it may be in traditional Christianity is that sooner or later, bad theology always leads to bad practice - and in this case, it already has! Replacement Theology has provided the basis for all sorts of mischief, persecution, and atrocities against the Jewish people throughout Christian history.

For example, Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, was a supersessionist. Near the end of his life, he said that synagogues and Jewish schools should be burned to the ground, Jewish people run out of their homes, their prayer books and Talmudic writings burned, and the rabbis forbidden to preach or teach on penalty of death ("On the Jews and Their Lies," Trans. Martin H. Bertram, in Luther's Works [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971], pp. 268-271). Luther also declared that Jewish people in Germany should be confined to their own homes and neighborhoods - a plan the Nazis implemented literally when they quarantined Jewish families in ghettos in Poland and other places before shipping them to the death camps for extermination. One historian writes: It is difficult to understand the behavior of most German Protestants in the first Nazi years unless one is aware of two things: their history and the influence of Martin Luther. The great founder of Protestantism was both a passionate anti-Semite and a ferocious believer in absolute obedience to political authority. He wanted Germany rid of the Jews. Luther's advice was literally followed four centuries later by Hitler, Goering, and Himmler (William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* [New York: Simon & Shuster, 1960], p. 236).

No one is suggesting that anyone who believes in Replacement Theology is an anti-Semite or would agree with Luther's statements. That would be an unfair characterization - and it certainly is not the case. It is important, nevertheless, to examine the implications and ramifications of any position, including Replacement Theology: and it is an incontestable fact that ideas similar to those of Replacement Theology have inspired some horrible atrocities against the Jewish people.

We're Making Progress!

As we observed earlier, the term "Replacement Theology" is relatively new, and is generally avoided by adherents of supersessionism. As far as they are concerned, they're simply espousing traditional theology - and in a sense, they are! Supersessionist ideas have been widely accepted in mainstream Christianity since the third century or so, as mainstream Christianity was gradually losing its original Jewish character. The Gentile powers-that-be in early institutional (Eastern and Western) Christianity wanted to distance themselves from Christianity's Jewish origins. And they did!

Most Baptists today are premillennial (except for the most liberal Baptist denominations), as are many Bible churches, particularly those associated with IFCA (Independent Fundamental Churches of America) International and similar groups of independent churches. There are even premillennial Presbyterians! Much of the opposition comes from the more liberal, mainline denominations and their seminaries. And it's not merely coincidental that these are the same churches and institutions that are aligned with the anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian World and National Councils of Churches.

If you'd like to know if your church leaders believe in Replacement Theology, ask them! If they are not familiar with the term, be patient because it's entirely possible that they have never heard it before, even if they attended seminary. Also, it's not likely that they've ever knowingly aligned themselves with any view that's anti-Semitic, anti-Judaic or anti-Israel. This may all be new to them! Ask them, very humbly and sincerely, if they believe that YHVH rejected Israel when Israel rejected His Son in the first century and that as a result, He has no future plan or purpose for the Jewish nation. They may reply that yes, of course, Jewish people can be saved and join "the Church" - and to them, that means YHVH has a plan for the Jewish people. However, that's not what we're asking. We want to know if they believe that YHVH is no longer dealing with the Jewish nation - and don't be surprised if the answer, ultimately, is in the affirmative. After all, as we saw earlier, this has been the predominant view of mainstream Christianity for centuries - roughly since the time of Augustine, in fact, and sadly, remains so today.

Let's not be afraid to challenge theological tradition when it's wrong. It's our responsibility to proclaim and defend the premillennial hope of the nation of Israel - in these days of widespread error and apostasy. We should encourage our premillennial Bible colleges and seminaries to take a stand on Replacement Theology and challenge them to produce graduates who are knowledgeable about the historical and theological issues Replacement Theology encompasses.