

Is There a Future for Israel A Biblical Look at Replacement Theology

By Clark Blanchard

- *What is Replacement Theology?*
- *Is Replacement Theology biblical?*
- *What are its results?*

Replacement Theology is the theological view that Israel has been permanently replaced by the Church in the program of God. It teaches that God once-for-all abandoned Israel when they rejected Jesus Christ and all of the promises made to Israel in the Scriptures find their fulfillment in the Church. What God began with Israel He is finishing with the Church. The promises to Israel, being temporal, earthly, material, and literal are selectively allegorized to fit the Church today. The allegories are selective in that some promises, such as material prosperity, are taken literally and others, such as persons, times, and places are spiritualized.

As one would expect, this has resulted in a wide range of interpretations within the Replacement Theology community itself. It has also created difficulty within this camp regarding how biblical interpretation is handled in general. Once selective allegorizing begins, it becomes a slippery slope anywhere in Scripture.

The Origin of Replacement Theology

Within the early Church, there was considerable tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians over numerous issues such as diet, circumcision, fellowship, and others. Galatians shows how the Jews tried to impose the Mosaic Law on Gentile Christians, and Romans shows how Gentiles began to *boast against the* [Jewish] *branches* that had been cut off (Romans 11:18). Eventually, the dominant Gentile Christian view was that the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 A.D. and the Jewish dispersion signaled the official and divinely-ordained end of Israel.

In addition, the tensions between the remaining Jews and the Roman government made the Gentile Church further distance itself from the Jews by numerous means. For example, the Church adopted the codex [book form] of Scripture instead of the traditional scroll and changed their meeting day from the Sabbath (Exodus 31:7) to Sunday. Gradually, the concept developed that God had permanently replaced Israel with the Church.

However, Replacement Theology did not become the official position of the early Christian leadership until Augustine (354-430) popularized it, primarily in his book, *The City of God*. Augustine actually states that he was previously a believer in a literal thousand-year reign of Christ on earth after His return. However, he had come to the conclusion that this view was *caral* and adopted the view that the reign of Christ would be something more *spiritual* and would actually occur during the Church Age. This put the stamp of approval on the concept of Replacement Theology.

Christendom canonized Augustine as an official saint, and theologians throughout the Roman Empire accepted his doctrines. Augustinian Replacement Theology became a cornerstone of Roman Catholic theology. During later developments in the Eastern Orthodox Church, the European Reformation, and the Anglican split, Replacement Theology continued essentially untouched. Replacement Theology became a view that survived the Middle Ages, the Crusades, and the Reformation in Church history. Only during the last century or so has the Premillennial Dispensational concept of Israel and the Church come to the forefront, opposing Replacement Theology in Evangelical Christianity. Even so, the Dispensational concept is still a minority view within Christendom.

The Error of Replacement Theology

The error of Replacement Theology is that it fails to interpret the Scriptures according to well-established logical principles of interpretation (hermeneutics). These principles dictate that we attempt to determine what the writer had in mind when he wrote the passage. To do this, each passage must be taken at face value and understood in its normal ordinary plain usage of the language according to its various contexts. It's like interpreting a letter from a friend. We should interpret a passage as an allegory only if the context specifically so indicates (e.g. Galatians 4:21-31).

Replacement Theology requires major violations of this approach. It requires that all biblical references to Israel's future material blessings and promises be applied to the Church, selectively. It requires interpretation by extensive use of allegories so that literal statements about Israel's future become allegories for the Church in a selective manner.

Of course this produces at least two major problems. The first is in determining what type of allegory, if any, applies to each passage. The second problem is that Replacement Theology adopts the blessings of Israel for the Church, usually by allegory, but conveniently ignores dealing with Israel's curses. It's inconsistent and highly subjective.

And it's not just Old Testament passages. For instance, in Romans chapters 9 through 11, Paul discusses literal Israel and God's dealing with it in the past, present, and future. In this section, he discusses the fact that God will save the entire literal nation--in the future. *For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and thus all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "The deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob. This is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins"* (Romans 11:25-27).

Somehow, Replacement Theology must bend the interpretation so that Israel does not mean Israel. If that is so, what is Paul's whole line of reasoning? See Revelation 7:4-8 for another example.

Therefore, we must conclude that the teaching of Replacement Theology, even though it is an ancient majority doctrine, is not biblically correct in its view of Israel or the Church in its approach to methods of biblical interpretation. This, in turn, has led to numerous other erroneous views that grow out of it. It is a major "watershed" doctrine.

What Are Some of Its Results?

- (1) It teaches an erroneous method of biblical interpretation. It teaches wide use of selective allegory and spiritualization. It teaches that the Bible doesn't always mean what it appears to say. For example, when it speaks of Israel, sometimes it means literal Israel and sometimes it means the Church.
- (2) Because of (1), it teaches people to allegorize virtually any passage, thereby placing the teaching authority with the reader rather than with the Scripture. This is probably worse than having the wrong view of Israel and the Church.
- (3) Because of (1), it produces division among believers because there are so many different ways to allegorize or spiritualize a given literal passage.
- (4) It gives the Church and present-day believers erroneous expectations about what God has promised in Scripture and what He is doing in the Church today. For example, the idea that obedience will bring material prosperity (blessings) belongs to Israel under certain conditions in their land, not to the Church today (Deuteronomy 11:8-17).
- (5) It produces false expectations in the Church regarding God's covenants, which belong entirely to literal Israel not to the Church (Romans 9:3-5).
- (6) It produces false expectations in the Church regarding government and politics because the nation of Israel was both religious and political. It confuses the role of the Church today with the role of Israel in the past and in the future, politically.
- (7) It produces an anti-Semitic outlook. It teaches that there is nothing special about the Jews, now or in the future. It encourages boasting against the natural branches (Israel) because they have been broken off (Romans 11:17-24).

Questions and Answers

Q: *What is Replacement Theology?*

A: It is the theological teaching that God has permanently replaced Israel with the Church and that the literal material promises He made to Israel are fulfilled by selective allegory in the Church.

Q: *Is Replacement Theology biblical?*

A: No. It denies the fact that God has established two permanent and separate spiritual entities, the nation of Israel and the Church. Each has its own characteristics and purposes. It is based upon an erroneous means of biblical interpretation using selective allegory and spiritualization of literal passages without justification in the context. It is done so on a very wide basis over hundreds of biblical passages.

Q: *What are its results?*

A: It (1) produces a non-biblical view of both Israel and the Church and (2) it erroneously teaches broad use of selective allegory and spiritualization in biblical interpretation.