

WHY DO SO MANY CHRISTIANS BELIEVE IN REPLACEMENT THEOLOGY?

by Dennis Corkery

In a previous article, I presented a definition of replacement theology¹. I will now critique replacement theology demonstrating that the doctrine rests on a faulty foundation. The observation that replacement theology has been the dominant view of Christendom throughout most of church history is indisputable. The only exceptions are the apostolic era and perhaps during the early second century. How did it come about that so many Christians hold to replacement theology?

The primary reasons for the dominance of replacement theology are not biblical but rather historical-cultural and theological. Although those who defend replacement theology refer to proof texts to support their case, their doctrine is not a scriptural extraction. First, we must consider how historical-cultural events advanced the theory that the church has displaced Israel. Then we will consider how trends in Bible interpretation (hermeneutics) fuelled and entrenched replacement theology.

¹ The theory (also known as supersessionism) claims the church has assumed the promises, privileges, and purposes of God originally committed to national Israel.

The Influence of Historical-Cultural Events

The church's story begins in the book of Acts in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. The book of Acts documents the expansion of Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome, consistent with her commission to spread the gospel to the uttermost parts of the world (cf. Acts 1:8). On the day of Pentecost, 120 Jewish disciples following the instructions of Jesus waited in Jerusalem and received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, marking the birth of the church (cf. Acts 1:4-5; 2:41). The Jerusalem church grew exponentially in numbers and influence in its first five years (cf. Acts 2:41; 6:7). The setting for the first seven chapters of the book of Acts is exclusively in Jerusalem and Judea. All of the recorded sermons in this section are addressed to Israel (cf. Acts 2:14, 22, 36; 3:25, 4:1, 8; 7:2)

It is difficult to determine when Jewish believers became a numerical minority in the church. However, the trend toward Gentile inclusion began when persecutions arose against the church in Jerusalem. After the martyrdom of Stephen, the mission of Philip in Samaria, the conversion of Saul, and the Spirit baptism of Gentiles in Caesarea, the focus of the Acts narrative shifts away from the church's Jewish roots. After Paul's three missionary journeys and to the close of the book of Acts in Rome, Gentiles were likely in the majority. With this cultural shift within the church, it is not difficult to see how the covenants made to Abraham and David in the forefront of disciple's minds in the early chapters of Acts might have become clouded in Gentile assemblies if not largely forgotten (cf. Acts 1:6, 7)

The next pivotal event that laid a lasting foundation for anti-semitism in the church was the First Roman-Jewish War (A.D. 67-73)². Disputes over Roman taxation and the breach of the Temple Treasury by Roman troops seizing what they considered due taxation led to a full-fledged Jewish revolt. In 67 A.D., Emperor Nero dispatched General Vespasian to restore order. Confederate with his son Titus a combined force of

² The First Roman-Jewish War began approximately at the time of Paul's martyrdom (A.D. 67). There is no reference to the destruction of the Temple in his epistles.

about 60,000 thousand soldiers seized control of Galilee. Vespasian, in 69 A.D., was recalled to Rome to address the unrest in the city, and shortly after, he was appointed emperor. In 70, Titus breached the walls of Jerusalem and burned the Herodian Temple to the ground. The fall of Jerusalem was a devastating blow to the Jews and Judaism. Titus's army killed over a million Jews in the massacre taking about 100,000 captives.

We can easily imagine the psychological impact that the destruction of the Jewish Temple and the overthrow of Jerusalem had upon Christianity. The violent, sudden, humiliating demise of Judaism compared with the rapid expansion of Christianity in Gentile lands led many Christians to conclude that Judaism had met with the disfavor of heaven. These historical events marking the rise of Christianity and the parallel decline of Judaism profoundly impacted the development of Christian theology.

The Influence Of Christian Theology

As the Christian church began to form and articulate its theology, it distinguished itself from Judaism. The works of early Christian theologians and apologists underscore this trend. For example, Justin Martyr (50-117A.D.) described the church as the new Israel. By Examining a few of Christianity's most influential thinkers, it becomes evident that the church lost sight of Israel's role in the design of God. Even worse, in many instances, we discover repulsive anti-semitism.

An important personality in this discussion is Marcion of Sinope (85-160 A.D). Although eventually denounced as a heretic, he is notable for differentiating the church from Judaism. Marcion was the first person to draw up a list of New Testament canonical books and the first to emphasize the discontinuity between the New and Old Testaments. He also considered the God of the Old Testament to be inferior to the God revealed in the New Testament. In his view, the God of the Old

Testament was not the Father of Jesus Christ. Marcion firmly instilled a sense of Israel's irrelevance and Christian superiority.

Melito of Sardis was an early Christian Bishop (120-185 A.D.). Melito supplies a significant stepping stone along the path towards anti-Semitism in the church and the entrenchment of replacement theology. Although he made positive contributions to Christian theology, he introduced the idea of Jewish deicide³. By hanging responsibility for the crucifixion of Christ around the necks of Jews, the church, under the influence of Melito, slid from considering Israel irrelevant to outright despising the Jews.

From this point in church history, the leading voices in Christianity advanced replacement theology not so much on a textual basis but on a historical-cultural, anti-semitic basis. Tertullian (155-240A.D.), for example, taught that the Gentiles had replaced Israel based on Jewish inferiority. Once Origen appeared in the annals of church history, a new distortion solidified replacement theology in Christian thought. Like many other Christians, Origen taught Jewish deicide. However, the most significant theological development associated with him was his method of Bible interpretation.

The Influence of Biblical Hermeneutics

Origen of Alexandria (185-253 A.D.) advanced the idea that three types of meaning exist in the biblical text. These are the literal, the moral, and the spiritual. Although allegorizing⁴ the biblical text was not a new practice, Origen's method became the benchmark for interpreters for following generations. His method did not meet any serious challenges until the Protestant Reformation (1517 A.D.). Even then, the reformers failed to shake a tendency to allegorize the Old Testament, the book of Revelation, and Gospel narratives.

³ Deicide refers to the killing God. More specifically, in this instance, it refers to the culpability of Jews in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Allegorization is a method of biblical interpretation that looks beyond the literalness of a text to discover the deeper, spiritual meaning.

With replacement theology and anti-semitism firmly fixed in Christian culture and theology, Origin's allegorical system legitimized the Christianization of the Old Testament. Israel became synonymous with the church. Previous covenants with Abraham and David were no longer considered literal but spiritualized and transferred to the church. In effect, Origin's hermeneutic succeeded in deleting the relevance of Israel as a nation. The church (spiritual Israel) was the apparent heir to God's promises of unfulfilled glory initially made to national Israel.

In possession of a license to spiritualize the scriptures, Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.) wrote his classic philosophy of history, "the City of God". He argued the Church fulfilled the prophetic passages predicting the restoration of Israel and the millennial kingdom. Augustine is the father of amillennialism⁵. His work influenced Catholic and Protestant eschatology resulting in amillennialism becoming the predominant view in succeeding church history.

In this discussion, we have briefly summarized how replacement theology took root in the church. It sprang from the historical-cultural and theological scenarios outlined and not from the authoritative text and, therefore, must be rejected.

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⁵ Amillennialism denies a literal fulfillment of prophetic predictions of a 1000 year reign of Christ from Jerusalem.

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