

R. Kendall Soulen, "Replacement Theology," in *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations* ed. Edward Kessler and Neil Wenborn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 375-376.

Replacement Theology

has entered the parlance of contemporary theology in recent decades to refer to the traditional Christian teaching that with the coming of Jesus Christ the church has taken the place of the Jewish people as God's elect community. The term is substantially equivalent to supersessionism (q.v.), and the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Both designate a theological perspective that interprets Christian faith generally and the status of the church in particular so as to claim or imply the abrogation or obsolescence of God's covenant with the Jewish people.

Replacement theology took shape during the second century CE, based upon a selective and embellished reading of the New Testament, and was a generally accepted staple of Christian theology from the third century onward. Christian theologians found various ways to express the central idea that the church had supplanted the Jewish people and henceforth was the true Israel (*verus Israel*) of God. Some (e.g. Justin Martyr, Tertullian) emphasized the persistent failure and disobedience of the Jewish people culminating in their crucifixion of Jesus and rejection of the Easter gospel. According to this view, God finally cast off unbelieving Jews because of their sins and gave their inheritance to another people, the Gentile church. Others (e.g. Melito of Sardis, Augustine) emphasized the idea that God had always intended the Jewish covenant to be temporary in character, an earthly foreshadowing of heavenly goods to be made available in the church. On this perspective, the distinguishing features of Israel's covenant (temple, sacrifices, participation through carnal descent, etc.) naturally lost their validity with the birth of the church, which offered the old benefits in a new and superior form. While the two perspectives are compatible, and indeed are often found side by side in the same authors, their emphases differ. The first portrays the Jewish people as disobedient in fact, while the second portrays the Jewish covenant as obsolete in principle. In modern times, the second view has been especially prominent among apologetically minded theologians who have advocated a developmental or progressivist interpretation of Christian faith (e.g. Schleiermacher, Hegel, Harnack).

The Holocaust prompted many Christians and Christian denominations in Europe and North America to embark upon an unprecedented critical examination of Christianity's traditional teachings regarding the Jewish people. A major outcome of this reassessment has been the formation of a broad (though not universal) consensus regarding the inadequacy of replacement theology, which is now perceived to have formed the lynchpin of Christianity's historic teaching of contempt toward Jews. Accordingly, the identification, analysis, and repudiation of replacement theology has occupied a prominent place among Christians seeking to put the church's relationship to the Jewish people on a new theological footing. However, there is less agreement among Christians about what replaces replacement theology. Clearly, the rejection of replacement theology entails some affirmation of the continuing validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people. But Christians differ about the implications of the rejection of replacement theology for other central Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the person and work of

Jesus Christ, the universality of the church's mission, and so on. Pioneering among Roman Catholics has been the work of Franz Mussner, who has appealed for a renewed appreciation for the Jewish roots and dimensions of all aspects of Christian faith. Among Protestants, the dominant voices of the 1970's and 80's (Rosemary Ruether, Roy Eckhart, Paul Van Buren) argued that a rejection of replacement theology requires a corresponding rejection or minimization of doctrines traditionally regarded as constitutive of Christian identity by the ecumenical church (e.g. that Jesus is the Christ). Since then, Protestant theologians have increasingly embraced the view that the most promising avenue for future exploration lies in the direction of reinterpreting rather than rejecting traditional affirmations in light of the churches' new understanding of God's continued fidelity to God's covenant with Israel.