



God Doesn't Change His Choice

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Dr. Edward Kessler, Director of the Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations in Cambridge, England, argues against "Replacement Theology", i.e., the teaching that since the time of Jesus the Jews have been replaced by the Christians in God's favor, and that all God's promises to the Jews have been inherited by Christianity.

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by Edward Kessler

In the past few weeks, an old problem is generating a new controversy in Christian-Jewish relations: the doctrine of replacement theology. This is the teaching that, since the time of Jesus, the Jews have been replaced by the Christians in God's favour, and that all God's promises to the Jews have been inherited by Christianity.

The Jewish columnist Melanie Phillips has suggested that replacement theology, as well as antisemitism, lies behind some of the criticism of Israel. Last week the Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks pointed to an increase in antisemitism in the UK.

Concern about replacement theology has become prominent for two reasons: first, the collapse of the Israeli/Palestinian peace process and the current intifada have alarmed Jews, Christians and Muslims, and have greatly increased their sensitivities.

Second, 11 September and its consequences have resulted in a greater awareness of the encounter with Islam, and the significant differences between the three Abrahamic faiths.

One of the keenly debated topics in the encounter between the Abrahamic faiths is replacement theology because some Muslim theologians argue that Islam supersedes Christianity (as well as Judaism). If Christianity replaces Judaism, so the argument goes, Islam can replace Christianity.

But does Christianity teach the replacement of Judaism? If we examine the writings of the Church fathers the only possible answer is yes. The fathers argued that, because the Jews had rejected Jesus, they were punished by having their temple destroyed and by being exiled from the land of Israel. Christians allowed Jews to survive in an impoverished state so that their lowly position could witness to the truth of Christianity. As a result, contempt for Judaism became central to Christian teaching and the development of Christian identity.

Fortunately — for both Jew and Christian — now there is a reawakening to the Jewishness of Christianity, and a recognition that the formation of Christian identity is dependent on a positive relationship with Judaism.

This is not a new approach, but a rediscovery of an old doctrine expressed by Paul. In his letter to the Romans (especially chapters 9-11), Paul discusses the continuing validity of God's covenant with his Jewish people.

If the Church, as the New Israel, replaced the Old Israel as the inheritor of God's promises, does

this mean that God reneges on his word? If God has done so with regard to Jews, what guarantee is there for the Churches that he won't do so again, this time to Christians?

One might argue against Paul by saying that, if the Jews have not kept faith with God, then God has a perfect right to cast them off. It is interesting that Christians who argue this way have not often drawn the same deduction about Christian faithfulness, which has not been a notable characteristic of the last two millennia.

Actually, God seems to have had a remarkable ability to keep faith with both Christians and Jews, when they have not kept faith with him, a point of which Paul is profoundly aware in Romans 9-11. He goes out of his way to deny claims that God has rejected the chosen people, and asserts that their stumbling does not lead to their fall.

In Paul's view, it was impossible for God to elect the Jewish people and later displace them. In his thinking, the hardening took place so that the Gentiles would receive the opportunity to join the people of God. The Church's election, therefore, derives from that of Israel, but this does not imply that God's covenant with Israel is broken. Rather, it remains unbroken — irrevocably.

Paul also offers a warning that Gentile Christians should not be boastful toward unbelieving Jews, much less engage in persecution of them. Christians have used Paul's criticisms against the Jews, while forgetting his love for them and their traditions.

The Pope says that "the covenant remains with the Jews" (Easter Letter, 1986) and the Lambeth Conference "rejects any view of Judaism which sees it as simply superseded by Christianity" (Resolutions, 1988).

However, the problem is that these views do not necessarily represent the ordinary worshippers' understanding of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Anecdotal evidence from parishes suggests that replacement theology is widely accepted, though in a muddle-headed, rather than antisemitic way.

What is needed is for Christian teaching about Judaism to be filtered through to the pew. Christian teaching today reflects a respect towards Judaism, which would have been unthinkable even a few decades ago. The majority of Churches are committed to the fight against antisemitism, and to rejecting replacement theology.

Perhaps most important of all is the need to learn more about the Jewish-Christian relationship. It is one of the few pieces of good news that can be reported in today's world. It is therefore encouraging that there are a number of organisations dedicated to improving understanding between faiths. These include [in the United Kingdom] the Council of Christians and Jews, the Three Faiths Forum (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), as well as the Inter Faith Network.

It is also good to see a growing number of people from different walks of life, including clergy and teachers, studying here at the Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations. Many share their new knowledge with their parishes. For example, one of our students has recently created an exhibition that shows Christians what Torah means to Jews.

With the support of various Churches, including the Church of England, as well as the Jewish community, we have created ten-week courses for clergy and lay people, requiring only three or four hours study a week.

These are all attempts to ensure that ordinary Christians and Jews are aware of the transformation in relations in recent years and, in the words of the Lambeth Conference 1988, that Jews and Christians share "a common mission to the world that God's name may be honoured".

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