

ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH: TRAGEDY AND BLESSING

Part 2

The Attitude and Reasoning of Replacement Theology

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The Bible is not just a book of laws like you pick up from the DMV so you can study for your driving test. It is not a set of random statements like you have in the Quran that has no middle and no end, no historical or thematic continuity. The Bible is replete with sequential narrative accounts of actual events that enhance our understanding of godly principles that are declared propositionally.

The Bible also reveals the historical background regarding beliefs that miss the mark. Such is the case when the Apostle Paul gave a firm warning to those who believe that God has replaced Israel with the church. It is the story behind the writing of the book of Romans.

The church in Rome actually had its beginning in Jerusalem. Acts 2 describes how Roman Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism were present in Jerusalem for the feast of *Shavuot* (Pentecost) on that eventful day when the Holy Spirit came upon the people (see v. 10). They left Rome as unbelievers but returned to Rome as believers in Yeshua (Jesus). And upon their return, they began witnessing to other Jews and Gentiles who, in turn, became believers, resulting in the founding of the church there, with a mixed heritage congregation.

But in 49 A.D. the emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome, including the Jewish Christians. There is a reference to that occurrence in Acts 18:2. With the Jewish believers forced out, Gentile Christians then assumed full leadership of the Roman church. About five years later, when Claudius died and Nero became emperor, Jews were able to return to Rome (cf Rom 16:3).

But it is apparent from the context of Paul's book to the Romans that the return of Jewish Christians to the church of Rome led to some conflict. Early in the book, Paul admonished the Jewish believers for boasting about their devotion to the Law (chaps. 2-4). But later Paul turns to the Gentiles within the church who were exhibiting their own attitude of superiority over the Jewish believers because their kinsmen as a whole had not accepted Yeshua as Messiah.

In Romans 11 Paul uses the metaphor of an olive tree to describe the relationship between believing Jews and Gentiles and between national Israel and the believing Jewish remnant. He describes Jews as being natural branches (v. 21) and Gentiles as being grafted-in wild branches (vv. 17,19). He compares the majority of Jews not believing in Yeshua to branches that were broken off the tree (vv. 17,20).

If we look at the history of Israel, we can see how God cultivated them like an olive tree in a grove. He cleared away idolatrous nations from the land for them. He nourished them with His Word and His presence among them. He faithfully worked on their behalf so that they might

produce good fruit. And whenever some of the branches failed to produce fruit, he pruned them away. Again and again as individual branches died spiritually because of unbelief, he cut them off. Over time most of the branches of this cultivated olive tree were pruned away. But never did He cut down the entire tree. Some of the natural branches always remained intact. They are faithful Jews who believe in Messiah Yeshua. Instead, He grafted in some wild branches among the remaining fruitful natural branches. Those are faithful Gentiles who believe in the same Messiah Yeshua.

So very clearly, God has not replaced Israel. He has *added* to Israel. Very clearly Paul is not teaching replacement theology but what might be characterized as “addition theology,” which is much more consistent with God’s grace and mercy and love for everyone.

But the problem was that the Christians of the church of Rome didn’t get it. They did not understand what God was doing. And it might be said that many Christians in churches far and wide for centuries since that time didn’t get it either.

After the Jewish believers had to leave Rome along with every other Jewish citizen, the Gentiles who assumed leadership of the church concluded that God had cut down the olive tree of Israel and had planted a brand new one. But Paul was telling them that their conclusion was wrong. And so was their attitude, warning: “do not be arrogant toward the branches” (Rom 11:18).

The Greek word translated as “arrogant” is *κατακαυχάομαι* (*katakauchaomai*). It has the sense of exulting over something or someone,” although it is typically translated as being “arrogant or boasting.” It is the negative form of the word *kauchaomai* that is used in the sense of rejoicing or “boasting in the Lord” (cf 2 Cor 10:17). *Katakauchaomai*, in contrast, expresses boasting at the expense of someone else.

Arrogant expressions of this sort tend to fall into three categories in the Bible: coveting—the arrogance of taking something that belongs to someone else (James 3:14), taunting—the arrogance of boasting about someone else’s apparent loss (1 Cor 13:4,5), and scoffing—the arrogance of denying your own weaknesses (2 Cor 12:5). Each of them is manifested within replacement theology.

Coveting—the arrogance of taking something that belongs to someone else

There may be no more misunderstood term than “the chosen people.” The average person probably has negative feelings about it. Many Christians would struggle to come up with a definition that is consistent with Scripture. I would say that the great majority of Jewish people today are uncertain of the original intent of the term.

This uncertainty stretches back to biblical times. One of the great struggles for the Jews back in the second temple period was how to put into perspective God’s choosing Israel from among the nations in order to accomplish His purposes. The foundational passage regarding the concept of a chosen people is found in Deut 7:6-7

“For you are a holy people to Adonai your God; Adonai your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. Adonai did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.”

Based on God’s sovereignty, when He chose Israel to be His covenant people, it was not because of any inherent greatness on their part. In the next verse we are told that God’s choosing was based on His **חֶסֶד** (*hesed*) – “lovingkindness” and His prior oath made to Abraham (Gen 22:16). It is grounded in God’s promise that through Abraham “all the nations of the world shall

be blessed” (Gen 12:3).

The intent behind the phrase “chosen people” is God’s way for the world to know about and to receive salvation. Through the Jewish people the world would be given God’s message of truth in the Holy Scriptures, and they could see a nation living in a vital relationship with the Creator (in spite of their periodic failures). And through the Jewish people the world would be given the Messiah, the Anointed One who would give his own life as atonement for the sins of humanity and thus provide the gift of salvation and eternal life.

Unfortunately, in the days when the New Testament was being written, this original understanding of chosenness was essentially lost. Many leaders in Judaism taught that eternal life was secured for Jews simply because of their physical heritage and their possession of the Torah (Law).¹ Clearly there was a misguided sense among the Jewish community in that day that they possessed intrinsic superiority over the nations who had no knowledge of Torah.

The question then arises—what about the Jewish believers in Yeshua? Did they share in this sense of superiority? We cannot answer concerning all communities of Jewish believers in that day. But based on Paul’s letter to the Romans, we know this was in fact true for some of the Jewish believers there. In spite of their faith in Yeshua, they still considered themselves as having an advantage over the Gentile members of the body. So Paul devoted a significant portion of the early part of his epistle to the problem. He refuted that wrongful perception by saying:

“For there is no partiality with God. For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law; and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law” (Rom 2:11-12).

Paul is saying that when it comes to our salvation, the Law gives us no advantage. He then criticizes them for their attitude of boasting in the Law (Rom 2:23-25).

It is very likely that the boasting of the Jewish leaders provoked the Gentile believers in the church. The Gentiles, in turn, responded with their own kind of boasting as we will see in a moment. And in the bigger picture, this boasting in the Torah contributed to the ever-increasing tide of anti-Jewishness within the greater church. This may sound like blaming the Jewish believers for their own persecution, just as it is easy to blame a rape victim heartlessly for what happened because of the clothes she was wearing. This is not to pardon the Gentile response, but gain understanding how they could use it as an excuse to act with contempt toward their Jewish brothers and sisters. And it provides the context that enables us to see the full picture of how replacement theology came to get a foothold in the church.

Proponents of replacement theology are always quick to point out the sins of the Jews. The fact of the matter is, haters of Jews can operate equally well with or without an excuse. Moreover, in a broader sense, usually it really doesn’t matter what other people say or do. If someone possesses something that you don’t have, there is a good chance that you would be envious about it and will try to find a way to get it for yourself. Such is the case when it comes to the “chosen people.” In spite of the widespread mocking of Jews for being called God’s chosen ones, in actuality many people wouldn’t mind being known as the chosen people themselves. And history has been our witness:

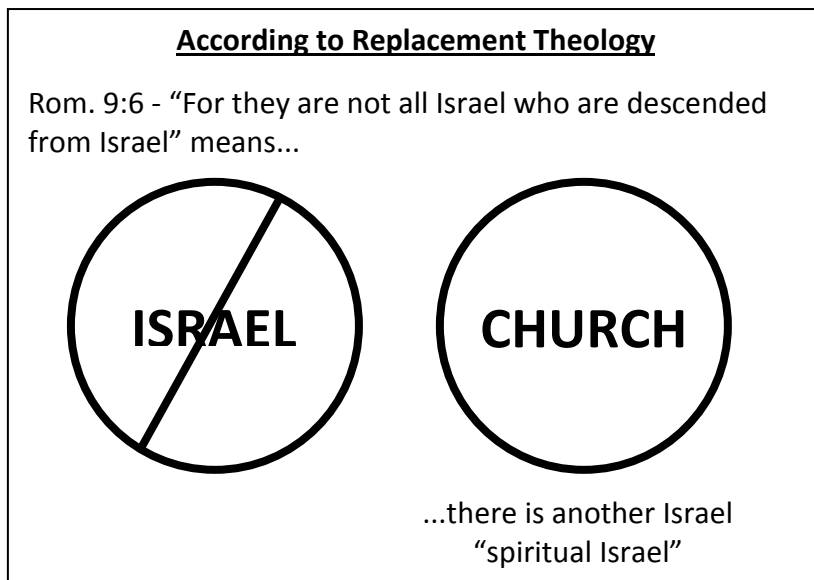
- According to advocates of British-Israelism, Anglo-Saxon Protestants are the true chosen people.
- According to the 19th century Dutch settlers in South Africa known as the Afrikaners, they were the true chosen people.

¹ For an example of this way of thinking, see Nicodemus’ encounter with Yeshua in John 3.

- According to the Mormons, the Latter-Day Saints are the true chosen people.
- According to Neo-Nazis, “the White, non-Jewish race is the true chosen people of God.”
- According to Louis Farrakhan, Black Muslims are the true chosen people.
- And according to many Christian teachers, the Church is the true chosen people.

The transferal of the designation “God’s chosen people” from Israel to the Church is at the heart of replacement theology. It really doesn’t require a great deal of biblical justification when you adhere to allegorical interpretation. If every reference to Israel in the Old Testament symbolically means the Church (with the exception of those unfavorable passages which are still anchored to Israel), then it is easy to conclude that when God said I have “chosen you to be a people for His own possession” (Deut. 7:6), it was actually the Christians of the Reformation era or our modern day that He was addressing. It was not the Jews that He had taken out of slavery in Egypt, or the Jews who wrote the Holy Scriptures, or the Jews who served in the temple worshipping the True God, or the Jews who gave the world the Savior. No, instead of Israel, God has only chosen the church.²

Proponents of replacement theology cite Romans 9:6 as evidence of their position: “For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel.” If you read this verse with the preconception that God has replaced Israel with the church, then you can easily conclude that Paul was saying words to the effect, “There is another kind of Israel besides the Jewish people.”



According to replacement theology, there are two Israels:

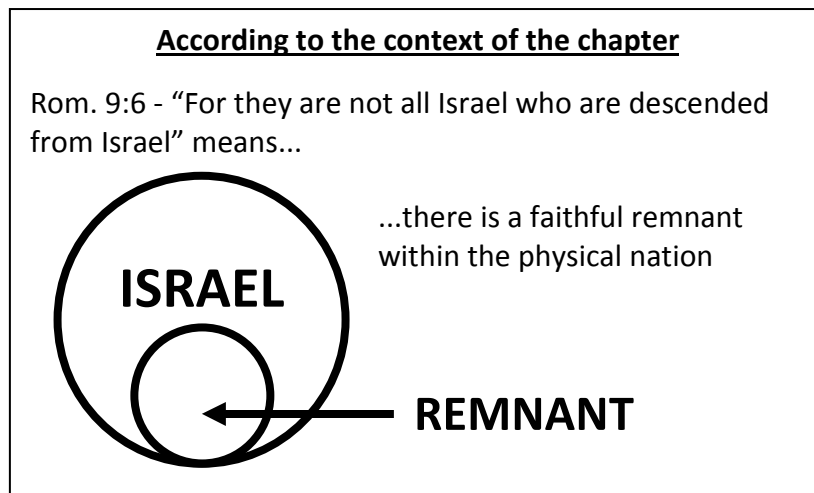
- Physical or national Israel, which has been rejected by God and is dead to God’s promises.
- Spiritual Israel (the church), which is blessed by God and heir to God’s promises.

² This belief is even contradicted by the only reference in the New Testament to the words of Moses regarding the “chosen people” from Deut 7:6. That solitary reference is found in 1 Pet 2:9, an epistle written to Jewish believers in the Greek diaspora (1:1) who live among Gentiles (2:12; 4:3). Peter quotes extensively from the *Tanakh*, not only implying considerable familiarity with the Hebrew texts by the audience, but also emphasizing those passages that have direct application to national/ethnic Israel (cf. 2:7). So this solitary reference is consistent with the biblical portrait of God choosing Israel to bring about His purposeful plan.

A key problem with that conclusion is that the term “spiritual Israel” is not part of the Bible. As shown in part one, that is a term that originated with Justin Martyr in the second century who used such inventions to justify his animosity toward Jews. An even greater problem is that it employs another flawed method of interpretation that is the companion to the allegorical method of seeking hidden meaning. Proof-texting is the act of taking a verse out of context in order to justify a preconceived notion.

The use of Romans 9:6 to justify the church replacing Israel is an example of proof-texting because it totally ignores the context of this chapter. Paul spends the prior verses of the chapter writing about the relationship between God and the ethnic Jewish people. Then in the verses that follow, he writes about how there is a smaller group within physical Israel who are the people of promise (Rom 9:7-27). So when we incorporate the context of this verse that supposedly justifies replacement theology, we learn that true Israel is actually not some kind of *replacement* group, but a *subgroup* within the physical nation.

Paul refers to them as the “remnant” (Rom. 9:27; 11:5). In other words, “not all Israel who are descended from Israel” refers to a faithful remnant within the physical nation. And the next two chapters of Romans continues with that theme. The same is true in the initial part of the book as he establishes that among the Jewish people there are Jews “outward in the flesh” and inward “of the heart, by the Spirit” (Rom 2:28-29). That is the lesson from using context accurately rather than pulling a verse out of context to satisfy your covetous desire to claim something that belongs to someone else.



That, however, is not the only kind of arrogance Paul warned about...

Taunting—the arrogance of boasting about someone else’s apparent loss

Today, opponents of Israel and the Jewish people are more sophisticated than the founders of replacement theology who were vitriolic in their condemnations. But in a way, sophisticated opposition is more dangerous because it is more palatable to the naïve masses. The reasoning of supersessionism can be depicted in the following illustration:

A man promises his son that when he dies, the son will inherit the father’s life savings. But when that fateful day arrived and the will was read, the father included this statement:

“My son, as you know I have always empathized with the plight of homeless people. And an opportunity arose for me to buy an apartment building that will house many people. So that is

what I did, and I have turned it over to a large group of homeless people who will now live there. I realize that you might be disappointed that you will no longer receive your inheritance, but it is better that many people benefit rather than just one. So you should be happy that this is the final outcome.”

The point is that supersessionists with a fulfillment theology orientation downplay God’s promises to Israel is by saying they are fulfilled in Christ, and that is a good thing, so everyone should be pleased about it, including Jews. To justify this position, Gal 3:16 is typically cited:

“Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as referring to many, but rather to one, ‘And to your seed,’ that is, Christ.”

Those who deny that God will fulfill His promises to national Israel perceive this verse as being a justification for their position. However it is a perception that is influenced by the emphasis on the New Testament always interpreting the Old Testament rather than using the entire Bible collectively. So this imbalanced approach will lead you to ignore what the Old Testament has to say because in your mind the answer is only found in the New Testament, and in so doing, you miss some very important context.

In the third chapter of Galatians Paul is discussing the way that Yeshua is the ultimate blessing for all of the people of this world. In verse 16 he quotes from God’s words in Genesis 22 after Abraham had demonstrated his faithfulness to the Lord’s instruction by being willing to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. But in order to understand Paul’s point in Galatians 3:16 you have to read the full statement by the Lord in Genesis 22:17-18. He declares:

“Indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”

The Hebrew word translated as “seed” is זֶרַח (*zerah*). This word can also be translated as “offspring, descendant or descendants.” That means it can be used either in singular or plural form. We have similar words in English like “deer.” We say one deer and two deer, not one deer and two deers. It is by the context that we know if it is referring to a singular or plural subject.

In Genesis 22:17 *zerah* is clearly used as a plural—the seed is compared to the “stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore,” which, in both cases, describes multiple components within a whole. So the seed of verse 17 refers to descendants or plural offspring.

But in verse 18, the form is less certain. We are only told that “in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.” The greater context of all Scripture shows that this is a reference to the Messiah who would bring the comprehensive blessing salvation to the world. And Paul confirms that in Galatians 3:16 by emphasizing the singular use of the word “seed” from Genesis 22:18. So the seed of verse 18 refers to a singular offspring.

Yet fulfillment theology blurs it all together and erroneously says that both uses of “seed” must be singular in form. This manner of interpretation can be illustrated by a woman reading to her husband from the diary of her grandfather. And she reads a portion that says, “We were driving along and came upon a large herd of deer, with so many of them that you couldn’t count them all. One deer had a large rack of antlers and it was extraordinarily eye-catching.” Later on, the husband is talking to another person and says, “My wife was talking about deer, and she says that according to what she reads, all deer have antlers.”

First, that is not a true statement about what his wife said. Second, that is not what the diary said. And third, that is not true about deer—only male bucks have antlers. Nevertheless, that illustrates the kind of logic that is used in fulfillment theology by applying a word or concept

that may be true in one circumstance but incorrectly to another one.

Very clearly Paul is not dealing with the issue raised in Genesis 22:17 regarding God's promises to Israel via Abraham, and were later repeated to Isaac and Jacob establishing an ancestral lineage. He was employing a normal Hebraic way of biblical interpretation called **דְּרַשׁ** (*derash*), meaning "seeking or inquiring." It is the root for the word *Midrash*, which is a commentary on the meaning of a text. *Derash* entails comparing biblical texts and drawing out deeper meaning, while not contradicting the **פְּשָׁט** (*peshat*), the "plain or literal" meaning of the text. In other words, the commentator would draw deeper meaning from one aspect of a passage while retaining the overall plain meaning of the text.

That is exactly what Paul was doing in his letter to the Galatians. His *derash* emphasized the role of Messiah and his *peshat* preserved the literal promise of God to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This manner of handling Scripture is overlooked by supersessionists, especially those with a fulfillment theology emphasis, because they have rejected the relevance of anything that precedes the anti-Judaic fathers of the church and the Reformation.

Sadly, fulfillment theology fails to address accurately the matter of historical context and Scriptural context. The problem with fulfillment theology is that it reduces truth to a binary state—all Scripture refers to Yeshua or nothing. It should be noted that fulfillment is indeed a biblical concept, especially in regard to Yeshua being the fulfillment of the Torah and Messianic prophecies. But Scripture is filled with prophetic references that address other matters of God's redemptive plan besides the role that is played by Yeshua. An example would be the kingdoms that would arise according to the Prophet Daniel (Dan 7). The same is true for the captivity and return of the Jewish people to the land given to them by God (Deut 30:3; Jer 12:15).

On the surface, fulfillment theology sounds appealing and pure in its simplicity of all things being fulfilled in Messiah, but it neglects many biblical elements that also relate to God's redemptive plan, even if they do not bear the ultimate weight of what Messiah has accomplished through His birth, death and resurrection. On the other hand, a disciplined and biblically-faithful means of hermeneutics affirms that the truths stated in Genesis 22 and Galatians 3 regarding the Messiah and the nation from which He would arise are equally valid. In other words, Yeshua can be the great blessing of the world without diminishing God's faithfulness to national Israel.

Scoffing—the arrogance of denying your own weaknesses

There is no place in Scripture that says the church *is* Israel or has *replaced* Israel. Yet one of the verses cited as evidence for the church being Israel is Galatians 6:16. It is a verse that is part of Paul's benediction at the end of the epistle. Context again plays a role. It must be read in conjunction with the previous verse, since the latter refers to the former.

For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God (Gal. 6:15-16).

The "them" of verse 16 refers to the ethnic Jews and Gentiles of verse 15. The controversy is over the identity of the "Israel of God." Proponents typically rephrase the words of Paul to say that "All Christians, be they Jewish or not, are the Israel of God."³

³ M.H. Woudstra, "Israel and the Church: A Case for Continuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. J.S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), 235.

Remarkably, the supersessionist argument hinges on the translation of one Greek word in this verse. In fact, it is the most common word in the New Testament – *καί* (*kai*). In that vast majority of the 9000 times it is used, it is translated as “and.” But in a few cases it can be translated as “even or also.” Supersessionists say that the translation of Galatians 6:16 found in the great majority of Bibles is incorrect.⁴ In this verse, they argue, instead of “and” *kai* should be thought as “even.”⁵

Accordingly, the text would read, “peace and mercy be upon them, *even* upon the Israel of God.” That would imply that the “Israel of God” is a restatement of the “them” of the verse, referring to ethnic Jews and Gentiles—hence the church.

There are several problems with that kind of thinking. First, that is an flimsy kind of hermeneutics that hinges on the use of the single word “even” instead of “and.” Surely there must be more to the evidence of such a new way of thinking. But that is not the case.

Second, it is deficient handling of the Greek language. All word for word translations of the Bible translate the disputed *kai* in this verse as “and” for good reason. There are specific grammatical principles that apply when handling *koine* Greek, including some that specifically related to the word *kai*.⁶ But the forced rendering of the verse advocated by supersessionists violates these disciplined rules of interpretation.

Third, it ignores context. Paul uses the word Israel a total of 15 times in his epistles. In every other place where Paul uses the word Israel, it relates to ethnic Jews, including some who are believers in Yeshua. In fact you can clearly see by the context in every instance throughout the New Testament, 65 times in all, that the discussion involves ethnic Jews in some manner. Does it make sense that suddenly Paul is going to introduce a completely different understanding of a word in a benediction at the end of a letter?

That would be like sitting down with your spouse and having a meaningful conversation about your children, and about needing to refinance the house, and where you want to go on vacation, then saying, “I have to get up early in the morning, so I’m heading to bed.” And as you are about to leave the room, turning around and saying, “Oh, by the way, I got promoted to the CEO of the company today.” Or, in a negative version of the story, saying, “Incidentally, I know how you were looking for the cat this evening, but I need to tell you that I drove over it this morning.”

That is what it would be like for Paul to write with such consistency over several books of the Bible, using the word Israel uniformly when dealing with a variety of issues related to the Jewish people, and then suddenly tossing out a radical new application of the word in the closing verses of one letter. Such a method would be highly contrary to Paul’s predisposition to develop significant biblical concepts systematically and meticulously.

The phrase “Israel of God” is consistent with the greater context of his writings involving the believing remnant of Jews within Israel. In the book of Galatians Paul was highly critical about those Jewish believers who insisted that circumcision was required for anyone to receive salvation, along with the yoke of slavery to the Law (Gal 5:1-3). But he was not critical of those

⁴ The NIV, which originally used “even,” now in its latest revision has changed a little bit by dropping the “even” and putting “and” in a footnote.

⁵ See A.A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 197.

⁶ For a discussion on the explicative usage of *kai*, see S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., “Paul and “The Israel of God””: An Exegetical and Eschatological Case-Study, *TMSJ* 20/1 (Spring 2009) 41-55. See also Granville Sharp, *Remarks on the Uses of the Definitive Article in the Greek Text of the New Testament: Containing many New Proofs of the Divinity of Christ, from Passages which are wrongly Translated in the Common English Version* (Philadelphia: B.B. Hopkins, 1807).

Messianic Jews who upheld salvation by faith alone. Once again, they were and are the faithful remnant within the nation. Paul was including them in his benediction, and in so doing, he acknowledged once again that two types of Israelites exist—“circumcision” (an ethnic one), *and* the “Israel of God” (a believing one).

Replacement theology is simply bad hermeneutics. It makes conclusions by proof-texting without consideration of context. It ignores the Hebraic way of thinking employed by the biblical authors like Paul. It handles the biblical languages recklessly. It fails to acknowledge the weakness of their reasoning. And, regrettably, doing such things requires a great sense of arrogance.

Personal implications

God has severely limited our options for boasting

It is a peculiar phenomenon how something that is good can become a catalyst for ungodly behavior. But that is the nature of boasting and arrogance. When we consider something to be so right, we are tempted to boast about it. Like a football player celebrating a touchdown, we know that we have scored and we want the other team to know about it.

The real question is—what should our attitude be regarding the things we believe to be true? Here is what Scripture teaches us:

Thus says Adonai, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches” (Jer 9:23).

So if we can’t boast about ourselves or something we do, does that mean we just have to be silent and sit on our hands? Jeremiah goes on to say:

“but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am Adonai who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares Adonai.

We do in fact have something to talk about—not what the Israel and the Jewish people have done wrong and about our own rightness, but on what God has done right. And that will cure the disease of arrogance that has come upon the church for these many centuries now. So let us boast in the Lord alone. And let us remain humble in all things, fully appreciating the mercy that God has shown to us (Rom. 11:31).

We all need to be teachable

In spite of Paul’s admonition to the Gentile believers in Rome, in the long run the separation and arrogance never went away. In fact Rome became a focal point for the development of formal replacement theology in the centuries that followed. We might wonder how different things might have been if the Gentile leaders of the church in Rome had heeded Paul’s warning and learned to embrace the Jewish foundation of their faith.

But the same choice is available for Christians today. My hope is that Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ will come to realize that He is also Yeshua haMashiach, the Messiah of Israel. I also hope that we might reconsider the way that we have viewed the Jewish people within God’s plan.

It takes a little courage to admit we are sinners. It may take almost as much courage for Christians to admit that we may be wrong about something that we have held to be true since becoming a believer. We may be tempted to say that “Now that I am a Christian, I’ve got it all

figured out.” That is not the catastrophic arrogance of denying God. But we are all susceptible to feelings of superiority because of who we are or what we believe. God’s Word exhorts us:

“Give instruction to a wise man and he will be still wiser, teach a righteous man and he will increase his learning” (Prov 9:9).

Of course that also means the teaching must be accurate. So an even greater responsibility falls on those in authority who are called to teach (James 3:1). But wisdom and increased learning is essential for teachers and learners alike. And that applies profoundly to our understanding of the relationship between Israel and the Church.