

# Replacement Theology: Is it Wrong to Use the Term?

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[This article was adapted from a Blog article.<sup>1</sup>]

## 1. Introduction

Recently I have been reminded of the Reformed CT community's aversion to the label of supercessionism, or worse, replacement theology. In the last decade or so particularly I have read repeated disavowals of this term from covenant theologians. Not wanting to misrepresent or smear brethren with whom I disagree, I have to say that I struggle a bit with these protests. "We are not replacement theologians" we are told, "but rather we believe in transformation or expansion." By some of the objectors we are told that the church does not replace Israel because it actually IS Israel; well, "true Israel" – the two designations are really one. This move is legitimate, they say, because the "true Israel" or "new Israel" is in direct continuity with Israel in the Old Testament.

In this series of posts I want to investigate the question of whether it is right; if I am right, to brand this outlook as replacement theology and supercessionism.

## 2. Basics: what is a "replacement"?

A good thing to do as we begin is to have a definition of the word at issue. *Websters*

*New World Dictionary* defines the word "replacement" thus:

1. a replacing or being replaced 2. a person or thing that takes the place of another...

The entry for "replace" says,

1. to place again; to put back in a former or the proper place or position." (obviously, this does not apply to our question).

2. to take the place of... 3. to provide a substitute or equivalent for.

The synonym "supersede" means that something is replaced by something else that is superior. In the way I use the terms in a theological context I mean "to take the place of". The third meaning (i.e. to substitute) is somewhat relevant since some may be claiming that OT Israel has been switched out for another Israel. By "supercessionism" then, I mean any theology that teaches a switching out of "old Israel" with "new", "true Israel."

The question before us is whether the Church takes the place of Israel in covenant theology, and if so how? To answer that question we must ask several more. These include such important questions as, 'what exactly do covenant theologians say about

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<https://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2017/02/01/replacement-theology-is-it-wrong-to-use-the-term-pt-1/>

the matter? And do they ever use replacement terminology themselves?'; 'Can their understandings of Israel and the church, and so their "expansion" language, be supported from the Bible?'

If "Israel" and "the church" are the same thing then clearly we have our answer, and I can stop writing. If the church and Israel are the same any question of replacing one with the other starts and stops with the simple swapping of names.

### **3. Identifying "Israel"**

In the Old Testament Israel is either a person, the man Jacob who was renamed "Israel" by God in Genesis 32:28, or the nation of people (sometimes a part of them either in rebellion or redeemed) who stem from Jacob who are called "the children of Israel" in Genesis 32:32 (Israelites), or a designation for the promised land (cf. Josh. 11:16, 21).

Covenant theology adds to these designations another. For example, an anonymous devotional at Ligonier's website entitled "Who is Israel?"<sup>2</sup> claims that,

Finally, the term **Israel** can also designate all of those who believe in Jesus, including both ethnic Jews and ethnic Gentiles. In Galatians 6:16, the Apostle applies the name **Israel** to the entire believing community—the invisible church—that follows Christ. Paul does not make this application specifically in Romans 11; however, this meaning is clearly implied in his teaching about

the one olive tree with both Jewish and Gentile branches (vv. 11-24).

Although nowhere does the New Testament explicitly equate Israel with the church, the assumptions that lead the writer to his conclusion (not to mention his exegesis of Gal. 6:16 and his use of the Olive Tree metaphor) come into focus once his view of the church is understood.

Chapter Twenty-five of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* defines the Church like this:

I. The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that fills all in all.

II. The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.

You will notice that this definition places every saved {elect} person in human history into the Church. It also places all the those elect who will be saved into the Church. The Church is also seen as the Body of Christ, as well as "the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/who-israel/>

of God” outside of which there is no salvation.

Acceptance of this definition pretty much wraps things up as far as OT Israel is concerned. The saved saints under the Mosaic covenant were simply the Church of the time. Also, the kingdom which was repeatedly promised to the remnant of Israel is, well, the Church. Not the land, not Jerusalem, not the national throne or the temple on Mt. Zion, just the Church.

There is reason to dissent from the honored position of the Puritans cited above, and I shall have to do so later on. But right here my intention is simply note that according to this way of thinking the elect Church and elect Israel are the same thing. If this is the right tack then there is nothing wrong with the following thought from Anglican theologian Gerald Bray:

As men and women who have been grafted into the nation of Israel by the coming of Jesus Christ, Christians...lay claim to [the] love and the promises that go with it.<sup>3</sup>

Very well, we are to believe that Christians have been grafted into Israel. Bray too is alluding to Paul’s metaphor of the Olive Tree in Romans 11. Again, “Israel” here must mean believers, therefore, all believers are “Israel”. That is, IF these claims are true.

It’s a Real Thing

That replacement theology actually exists should be beyond dispute. In a well known

admission, the esteemed NT scholar C.E.B. Cranfield wrote,

the assumption that the Church has simply replaced Israel as the people of God is extremely common. . . . And I confess with shame to having also myself used in print on more than one occasion this language of the replacement of Israel by the Church.<sup>4</sup>

If such a prominent voice as Cranfield’s says that replacement theology is no fiction then clearly we have something to talk about.

Although some non-covenant theologians have believed in supercessionism, this teaching is usually found in the sphere of covenant theology. A trip to Monergism.org brought up a link to an article on “Israel and Dispensationalism” that includes this:

The covenantal privilege that national Israel enjoyed as the chosen people of God was ended when the Jewish leaders “fill[ed] up... the measure of [their] fathers’guilt” (Matthew 23:32) by rejecting and crucifying their own Messiah. Jesus was very explicit in stating that the “house” of Israel was left “desolate” (Matthew 23:37-39), and that the Kingdom would be taken from the Jews as a people and given to another people (Matthew 8:10-12, 21:33-45, etc.).<sup>5</sup>

The “other people” to whom the kingdom was given is the church, according to the standard CT interpretation of Matthew

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Bray, *God Has Spoken*, 41

<sup>4</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2, 448.

<sup>5</sup> Greg Loren Durand, “Israel and Dispensationalism”, [http://www.preteristarchive.com/dEmEnTiA/1995\\_durand\\_israel-dispensationalism.html](http://www.preteristarchive.com/dEmEnTiA/1995_durand_israel-dispensationalism.html)

21:43. Such an interpretation implies a switching of one people (“the Jews”) with another people, a “supercession.”

As an example of a major voice from this perspective one can hardly get more authoritative or more trenchant than Herman Bavinck, who avers,

The community of believers has in all respects replaced carnal, national Israel.<sup>6</sup>

Another, though admittedly lesser example, would be covenant theologian Charles Provan, who wrote a book entitled *The Church is Israel Now: The Transfer of Conditional Privilege*. On the first page of his introduction, the author states that because the NT uses some of the same descriptions of the church as the OT does to describe Israel,

The only hypothesis which explains how this could be is that the Israel of the Old Testament (so called ‘Racial Israel’) had been replaced by the Israel of the New Testament, the Christian Church.

Provan’s book has been lauded by many. It is sold at the Metropolitan Tabernacle Bookshop in London, where I first encountered it. In his recent work *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, G.K. Beale commends the book’s thesis and acknowledges the influence it had on him (page 669, footnote 50).

A Preterist website carries a synopsis of the book by Provan in which he states,

When the Israelites obeyed God, God loved them. But when the Israelites turned from him, He hated them, stripping them of their Israelite status. After centuries of Israelite rebellion against God, culminating in their rejection of Jesus the Messiah, the titles, attributes and blessings of Israel were transferred to all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and to no one else, regardless of Abrahamic descent. The Church is Israel Now.<sup>7</sup>

In these excerpts it is clear that Provan had no problem with replacement terminology, and that he used the word “transfer” to denote a transfer of title from one entity (national Israel), to another entity (the church). The transfer even going so far as to take the name “Israel” from off the one and give it to the other. And since a book which plainly does teach replacement theology is recommended by many covenant theologians, one can hardly blame people who tar them with the same brush. In fact, to the degree that CT’s promote such works they practically drip the tar on themselves. This impression grows deeper when those who claim not to be supercessionists employ the very same arguments as those who do.

A final instance of this approach, at least for now, comes from a book whose purpose was to contrast the positions of dispensationalists and covenant theologians on the relationship between the Testaments. In his contribution to the book, entitled “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual”,

<sup>6</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4.667

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.preteristarchive.com/PartialPreterism/provan-charles\\_dd\\_01.html](http://www.preteristarchive.com/PartialPreterism/provan-charles_dd_01.html)

covenant theologian Bruce Waltke states that,

The Jewish nation no longer has a place as the special people of God; that place has been taken by the Christian community which fulfills God's purpose for Israel.<sup>8</sup>

There is, therefore, such a thing as "replacement theology", where some Christians believe and teach that the Church has taken the place of OT Israel, including its name.

#### **4. A Few Misunderstandings**

Notwithstanding, many covenant and even "new covenant" theologians; whose theology has often come under the censure of being "replacement theology" or "supercessionism", complain that these two labels are unfairly applied to their outlooks due to a misunderstanding of their theologies by dispensationalists. R. Scott Clark objects,

Those dispensational critics of Reformed covenant theology who accuse it of teaching that the New Covenant church has "replaced" Israel do not understand historic Reformed covenant theology.<sup>9</sup>

Right off the bat I am happy to concede that there are dispensationalists who have not properly understood what they were talking about. I hope that I shall not be included among their number. I have been studying covenant theology for over twenty-five

years, and own just about all of the classic works on the subject. In this study I shall quote from some of the most important authors to try and impart a good grasp of their approach to Israel.

Continuing where he left off, Clark writes,

First, the very category of "replacement" is foreign to Reformed theology because it assumes a dispensational, Israeleo-centric way of thinking. It assumes that the temporary, national people was, in fact, intended to be the permanent arrangement. Such a way of thinking is contrary to the promise in Gen. 3:15. The promise was that there would be a Savior. The national people was only a means to that end, not an end in itself. According to Paul in Ephesians 2:11-22, in Christ the dividing wall has been destroyed. It cannot be rebuilt. The two peoples (Jews and Gentiles) have been made one in Christ. Among those who are united to Christ by grace alone, through faith alone, there is no Jew nor Gentile (Rom. 10:12; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11).

There are reasons to examine this statement, and I shall look at it further on, but even if we grant his contention that we are assuming "a dispensational, Israeleo-centric way of thinking", it is hard to square his disavowal of "replacement" with the evidence I have already given. But what I wish to highlight here is Clark's line about, "The promise was that there would

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<sup>8</sup> Bruce Waltke, "Kingdom Promises as Spiritual," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Testaments*, ed., John S. Feinberg 275

<sup>9</sup> "Covenant Theology Is Not Replacement Theology," at <https://heidelblog.net/2013/08/covenant-theology-is-not-replacement-theology/>

be a Savior. The national people was only a means to that end, not an end in itself.”

In covenant theology the nation of Israel and the covenants that God made with them are merely a means to the end of furnishing us a Savior. We shall need to inquire more about this interpretation of the covenants of God, perhaps by seeing how CT’s understand God’s words in Jeremiah 31 and 33. But that will have to wait until the end.

## 5. Replacement of Concepts?

In the book *The Meaning of the Millennium* (ed. Robert G. Clouse), the well known postmillennial scholar Loraine Boettner said,

The land of Palestine...was given to Abraham and his seed “for an everlasting possession” (Gen. 17:8). But the same thing is said of the perpetual duration of the priesthood of Aaron (Ex. 40:15), the Passover (Ex. 12:14), the Sabbath (Ex. 31:17) and David’s throne (2 Sam. 7:13, 16, 24). But in the light of the New Testament all of those things have passed away.<sup>10</sup>

It stands to reason that if Israel’s promises have passed away, they have to be replaced by something else. But according to many Presbyterian covenant theologians the church has always existed, so they object to being called supercessionists. R.C. Sproul, Jr is a representative voice when he says,

The Reformed perspective takes a different tack. It affirms that that Israel which is actually Israel, just as with the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, applies to those who are in Christ, who trust in His finished work. Though we deny the moniker, this is what our dispensational friends call “replacement theology.” The Reformed, however, see this is as the outworking of the truth of Galatians 3:7- “Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham.” We who are Reformed do not believe God replaced Israel with the church. We believe instead that there has always been only one people of God, those who believe.<sup>11</sup>

An older work by W. J. Grier makes this abundantly clear:

Let us here insist that there was a Church in Old Testament times; and that the Old Testament and New Testament believers form one Church – the same olive tree (Romans 11).<sup>12</sup>

Seeing that this is the position of at least some covenant theologians, is it fair to label them as replacement theologians? Well, not in the sense that they believe the church has replaced Israel *in toto*, (although not a few of these men do slip into that kind of rhetoric on occasion). But I would argue that an identifiable form of supercession is still going on.

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<sup>10</sup> p. 98

<sup>11</sup> R.C. Sproul, Jr., <http://rcsprouljunior.blogspot.com/2012/01/ask-rc-is-it-true-that-god-blesses.html>

<sup>12</sup> W. J. Grier, *The Momentous Event*, 33



Grier's opinion that "Israel" equals believers stripped of the accoutrements of a designated land, with cities, a temple, priesthood and a king looks overly simplistic. These key OT themes are swept aside with a wave of the hand.

Consider this statement from Edmund Clowney:

The greatest promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the church – we are the temple of the living God.<sup>13</sup>

And again this by Steve Motyer:

[Paul] consistently applies to the church – that is, the mixed Jewish and Gentile congregations to whom he writes – the great covenant ideas and terms which had previously belonged to Israel. They are the elect (1 Thess. 1:4-5), the people called to holiness (1 Cor. 1:2), the justified who are objects of God's saving righteousness (1 Cor. 6:11; Rom. 3:22-24), the redeemed (Rom. 3:24; Eph. 1:7), who inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:10; Col. 1:12). They are the children of God (Rom. 8:14; cf. Exod. 4:22), on whom the glory of God rests (Rom. 5:2; 8:30), who offer pleasing worship (Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 5:1-2), and who can rightly appeal to the covenant faithfulness of God (Rom. 8:31-39). In all likelihood, when Paul calls God's peace and mercy upon 'the Israel of God' in Galatians 6:16, he is referring to the church.<sup>14</sup>

Clowney takes all the best promises to Israel in the Bible and gives them (though in a greatly altered condition) to the church. Motyer, like so many who take this line, thinks that God's speaking about the church in similar terms to the way He speaks about Israel is decisive in equating the two. In the Boettner quote we can see that the "perpetual duration" of the OT promises to Israel of land, king, priesthood etc., are not, in fact, perpetual; at least not in the way they would have been understood in OT times. The notion of perpetuity changes, as do the ideas of land, king, priesthood, temple, Jerusalem, and other associated matters.

## 6. Picking through the Assertions

I have defined "replacement" as meaning "to take the place of" and "supercession" as a switching out of one thing for another. In the essay by Clowney from which I have pulled the quotation above, the writer calls the church the true temple. The physical temple in Jerusalem was just a foreshadowing of the church. What was said about the temple can be applied about all the other items on the OT covenant list: king, land, Zion, priesthood, the preeminence of the nation among other nations, etc.

Let me concede the point about Israel being the church at present for the sake of argument, it remains true that the church is not a physical building or a nation in the usual sense (this category error will be revisited). So it would appear, for example, that the word "temple" in Clowney's statement is being used to refer to two different things. And it looks like the non-

<sup>13</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, "The Final Temple", in *Prophecy in the Making*, ed., Carl F. H. Henry, 84

<sup>14</sup> S. Motyer, "Israel (nation)", in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed., T. Desmond Alexander, et al., 585-586.

physical “temple” is superseding the physical Jerusalem temple. If so, then in the minds of OT believers, the idea of the temple as a physical structure on Mt. Zion is *replaced* by the idea of a called-out multitude of people. If we move on to land we shall find either that rather than referring to a designated territory separate from other territories, “land” now refers to heaven, or that it refers to the whole globe (usually on the new earth). The “king” does not reign over the nation of Israel in Jerusalem but instead is reigning now from heaven over the international church. Zion becomes another name for heaven, the Zadokite line of Levites become mainly Gentile Christians, and there is no such thing as the preeminence of Israel since “Israel” is the church and the church is all there is! So even though we don’t have replacement of one people group with another (because Israel = the church), we do have many replacements of important concepts with others.

Here is Greg Beale:

Here [Gal. 6:16], as in 2 Cor. 5:14-7:1, it needs to be emphasized that the church in fulfilling Israel’s end-time restoration prophecies is also fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecies of new creation.<sup>15</sup>

So the church fulfills the prophecies given to Israel over and over again in the OT. These fulfilments are not often literal (i.e. what would have been expected by hearers of the original words), but rather the concepts are substituted for other things. OT concepts (e.g. land, king, priesthood, temple

in *this* world) are replaced by others in the world to come. But in Jeremiah 31, 33 and Ezekiel 36-48 we find some of the most strongly worded promises of God to national Israel. *These are New covenant promises*, not conditioned on adherence to the law of Moses.

## 7. A Little More on the Reality of ‘Replacementism’

Theologian R. Kendall Soulen opens his book about supercessionism in church history with an explanation of what supercessionism is:

According to this teaching, God chose the Jewish people after the fall of Adam in order to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus Christ, the Savior. After Christ came, however, the special role of the Jewish people came to an end and its place was taken by the church, the new Israel.<sup>16</sup>

This description matches our basic definition of supercessionism as “the switching out of “old Israel” with “new”, true Israel.” I think I have already proven that this teaching exists. I add to previous quotes this one from the Adventist theologian Hans LaRondelle. He is referencing Matthew 21:43:

This solemn decision implies that Israel would no longer be the people of God and would be replaced by a people that would accept the Messiah and His message of the kingdom of God. Which new “people” did Christ have in mind?... In short, His Church (“My Church,” Matthew

<sup>15</sup> G.K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 724

<sup>16</sup> R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 1-2



16:18) would replace the Christ-rejecting nation.<sup>17</sup>

Someone might object to my citing a Seventh-Day Adventist to support my position, but before they do I think they should look up how many times this book is recommended by covenant theologians (I got the book after seeing it recommended by O. Palmer Robertson). Another scholar who recommends LaRondelle is Dennis Johnson. Along with this endorsement Johnson also seems comfortable with the term “supercessionism”. He defines it as follows:

“Supercessionism” refers to the New Testament’s assertions and implications that the church is the legitimate heir to the benefits once promised ancient Israel.<sup>18</sup>

He does not question this definition. He believes it.

## 8. Different and the Same

Even though Johnson’s view of supercession may fairly be said to differ from my definition, his approval of LaRondelle’s book, which, as I have stated, is hardly unique, shows that the basic ideas of the two coincide. We had previously seen the same sort of thing in Monergism’s and Greg Beale’s support of Charles Provan. This is one of the things that makes it so difficult to separate one from the other. Here is another prominent voice:

On the surface of it this is the end of the nation of Israel as the chosen people of God. They have been tried and found wanting. God’s patience has been exhausted.<sup>19</sup>

So one main teaching of supercessionism is that God has done with the *nation* of Israel. He has not, please note, done with the Jews as sinners who need saving. But He is through with national Israel. God once was concerned with Israel as a nation, but things have changed. National Israel has been *superseded* by the multi-national church. Gerstner provides more information on this by focusing on the spiritual nature of the new Israel:

[T]rue membership in Israel is ultimately a matter of spiritual rather than physical relationship... Paul teaches that Israel and the church constitute an organic unity. They are the same olive tree with the Gentiles of the church being grafted into the tree that was Israel (Romans 11:17-21).<sup>20</sup>

A similar sentiment can be found in a more recent Reformed Baptist work:

By gospel reformation Christ spiritually transforms God’s people from Hebrew Israel under the old covenant to Christian Israel under the new.<sup>21</sup>

What CT’s like to call “transformation” looks very like another word for types of

<sup>17</sup> Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 101

<sup>18</sup> Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 6 n. 7.

<sup>19</sup> John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 216

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 212 cf. also 225, 236

<sup>21</sup> Greg Nichols, *Covenant Theology: A Reformed and Baptist Perspective on God’s Covenants*, 115

supercession. For this position to have purchase the national promises to Israel must be seen, not as univocal pledges to those Israelites who trusted in Yahweh in OT times, which included the national, geographical, monarchical and cultic aspects of the various covenants. These covenant promises must be altered. If they are altered then they are to a large extent superseded.

Obviously, some writers are better at explaining themselves than others, and it is easy to pick on the worse expressions of these ideas. I intend to feature more nuanced views in this series where CT's make it clear that they believe the church *continues* Israel. Nevertheless, a difficulty for covenant theologians is that if they are going to equate Israel with the church they must address the *expectations* that God's prophets raised in the minds of Jews who heard and read them, at least before the time of Jesus. But if you change the *expectation*, doesn't that say something about the one who *raised* the expectation in the first place? Notwithstanding, this is what representative CT's claim that God has done:

Perhaps one of the most striking features of Jesus' kingdom is that it appears not to be the kind of kingdom prophesied in the OT and expected by Judaism.<sup>22</sup>

Mark 10:45 depicts Jesus as beginning to fulfill the Daniel prophecy [i.e. Dan. 7:13] in an

apparently different way than prophesied...in a hitherto unexpected manner.<sup>23</sup>

[E]arlier expressions point to things beyond themselves that are greater than the meaning that would have been perceived by those receiving these earlier expressions.<sup>24</sup>

For good communication to occur the speaker must impart his meaning to his hearer by using the right words. If the hearer comes away with a false interpretation and expectation, it may be that the words imparted misled the hearer. A real problem here, it seems to me, is that the promises God made to Israel were covenantally bound and were not open to reinterpretation or transformation (see Heb. 6:16-18). The *meaning* garnered from the original wording has been replaced hundreds of years down the line with another meaning; one that, as Beale says, "appears not to be the kind of kingdom prophesied in the OT and expected by Judaism." The first expectation has given way to another expectation. What is wrong with admitting that one expectation or meaning has been replaced by another? CT's must deal with these promises in their given contexts if they are going to deal with this issue fairly and squarely (these passages include, as I have said, Jeremiah 31, 33 and Ezekiel 36-48). But they very seldom do!

Incipient Supercessionism

So far I have tried to show not only that replacement theology exists and that it is a

<sup>22</sup> G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 431

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 195

<sup>24</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 123.

coinage of at least some covenant theologians, and that it can take the shape either of direct replacementism (i.e. the church replaces Israel), or else conceptual replacementism (aspects of Israel's promises are superseded by antitypes in the church). However, there is no shortage of men who vehemently deny that their theology is replacement theology. Sam Storms has stated,

Replacement theology would assert that God has uprooted and eternally cast aside the olive tree which is Israel and has planted, in its place, an entirely new one, the Church. *All the promises given to the former have been transferred to the latter.* But this is not what Paul says. He clearly states that there is but one olive tree, rooted in the promises given to the patriarchs. In this one tree (i.e., in this one people of God) there are both believing Jews (natural branches) and believing Gentiles (unnatural branches). Together they constitute the one people of God, the one "new man," the true Israel in and for whom the promises will be fulfilled. This one people, of course, is the Church.<sup>25</sup>

Just notice how the second line supplements the first, and Storms rejects them both. But the second sentence is almost a word-for-word what I have heard and read many covenant theologians actually teach. For sure, many do not say it

in such stark terms, but they come close. In Part One I cited Gerald Bray's opinion that,

As men and women who have been grafted into the nation of Israel by the coming of Jesus Christ, Christians...lay claim to [the] love and the promises that go with it.<sup>26</sup>

In Part Three Edmund Clowney was quoted as saying that the greatest promises to Israel in the OT are fulfilled in the church. We have seen Bruce Waltke's assertion that the church fulfills God's purpose for Israel, and R. Scott Clark's insinuation that national Israel was never intended to be the permanent arrangement, but rather was only a means to an end (which is the church).

This same thesis is plainly set out in chapters 20 and 21 of G. K. Beale's *A New Testament Biblical Theology*. For instance, he teaches that the church fulfills Israel's "restoration promises" (680). He says of Matthew 21:43 that,

Israel's stewardship of God's kingdom will be taken away from it, and the gentiles will be given the stewardship.<sup>27</sup>

If the stewardship of the kingdom has been taken from national Israel and given to the gentiles, then how is it that we are wrong to label this as a replacement of national Israel with the church? Beale follows this with a question based upon his understanding of Psalm 118:22:

<sup>25</sup> Sam Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 195 (my emphasis)

<sup>26</sup> Gerald Bray, *God Has Spoken*, 41.

<sup>27</sup> p. 681

But how does the psalm quotation offer a reason for this *transferral* of kingdom stewardship?<sup>28</sup>

He is quite sure that the church fulfills Israel's end time prophecies (e.g. 724). The church fulfills these prophecies only because the promises have been transferred from Israel to the church. All that is needed is to follow the logic. Adherents of covenant theology, of dispensational theology, or of other persuasions, have done this and they have come out where Storms and others have gone in, that is, with the understanding that indeed, "All the promises given to the former [Israel] have been transferred to the latter [the church]." Storms says he doesn't believe this, as this would be "replacement theology." Well, I think he needs to do much more to disentangle himself from the mess his own theology places him in. And I think it is not unfair to say that there is an intrinsic supercessionism within the genetic makeup of covenant theology. This is not the same as saying that all covenant theologians believe that they are supercessionists; something I will address soon. Let us have one more example:

Jesus accomplishes in his person and work what God intended for Israel as a people.<sup>29</sup>

But if what God intended for Israel was brought to fruition in Jesus; if Israel is rejected by God and the kingdom given to the church; if the locus of God's OT kingdom promises to the nation of Israel are fulfilled in a reconfigured form by the

church; if Israel is treated as a type of the church in Jesus; if the land of Israel is a type of the New Earth (and sometimes of the whole Universe as a temple), it is hard to avoid the conclusion that there is a large dose of replacementism resident within this way of reading the Bible.

### 9. Those who are more careful in their explanation of Israel and the Church

Having shown why Sam Storms' ideas about replacement theology hardly get covenant theologians off the hook I do want to concentrate on his main point, which is that in his theology the church grows out of the elect of Israel. I also need to revisit the notion seen above in the Gentry & Wellum quote that Jesus is the real Israel and the church is Israel in Him.

I think we need to treat this approach differently. While I do not think even this point of view can escape the association with replacement theory, I am inclined to give it a conditional pass. I say conditional because, of course, I have already said the seed of supercessionism lays within covenant theology. I want to give it a pass because I believe the reasoning set out in the Storms quote given above (omitting the first two lines), is more rooted in the ground of a particular approach.

For an example of this sort of holistic thinking spelled out in a way that one must take seriously I give two quotes from the great John Owen:

Instead of inheriting all the promises merely upon their carnal interest and

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* my emphasis

<sup>29</sup> Peter J. Gentry & Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 228

privilege, – which they looked for, and continue so to do unto this day, – they found that themselves must come in on a new account, to be sharers in them in common with others, or to be rejected whilst those others were admitted unto the inheritance.<sup>30</sup>

The old church was not taken away, and a new one set up, but the same church was continued, only in those who by faith inherited the promises. – Ibid, 124

Owen, in continuity with non-Baptist covenant theology, sees the church as *the* plan of God between creation and new creation. It is *the* plan through Jesus Christ. Viewed this way it only makes sense to see that the nation of Israel and the covenants with Israel and all the prophecies that are rooted in those covenants are, as Scott Clark says, a means to a greater end. From that position it also makes sense to read the Bible, the Old Testament especially, as a means to an end. The chief idea is not God replacing Israel in one way or another, but rather the whole vista of redemptive-historical thinking creating an imperative reading of the Bible which can only bring about one redemptive community.

In viewing the Bible from a certain redemptive-historical perspective (a common one I might add), the only conclusion that one can come to is that the church has always existed, and that therefore elect Israel in the OT was the

church of the OT to which now the Gentiles have been added in the NT era.

Remember these words from Sam Storms:

[Paul] clearly states that there is but one olive tree, rooted in the promises given to the patriarchs. In this one tree (i.e., in this one people of God) there are both believing Jews (natural branches) and believing Gentiles (unnatural branches). Together they constitute the one people of God, the one “new man,” the true Israel in and for whom the promises will be fulfilled. This one people, of course, is the Church.<sup>31</sup>

## 10. That Olive Tree

Readers will again notice the reference to Paul’s Olive Tree metaphor in Storms. Look at this line:

In this one tree (i.e., in this one people of God)...

But, of course, the tree isn’t the people (we saw this stated in Grier earlier). The branches of the tree are the people, and there are two “peoples”. In Robert L. Reymond’s *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (2nd ed) he appeals to this metaphor on pages 526-527:

Paul’s metaphor of the two olive trees (Rom. 11:16-24) also reflects this same perception: olive shoots from a wild olive tree, that is, Gentiles, are being grafted into the cultivated olive tree, that is, Israel, from which latter tree many natural branches, that is, Jews, had been broken off. This tree,

<sup>30</sup> John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol. 1, 119

<sup>31</sup> Sam Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 195

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Paul says, has a “holy root” (the patriarchs; see Rom. 11:28). Clearly, Paul envisions saved Gentile Christians as “grafted shoots” in the true “Israel of faith.

The reader could not have missed the constant references to the olive tree in Romans 11 in some of my previous citations. Many of them fail to properly expound the Apostle’s objective in that metaphor, usually by mistaking the tree for Israel. The Olive tree figure is again [mis]used by Robertson who says,

Gentiles have been “grafted in among” the Israel of God (Rom. 11:17). They have become additional branches, joined to a single stock that is none other than Israel... In other words, they have become “Israelites.”<sup>32</sup>

a. The branches from the wild olive tree are the Gentiles (v.17, cf. v. 25).

b. Those branches we are not to boast against are the Jews (vv. 18-20), the “natural branches” (v. 21), that is, Israel (v. 25).

c. If the rejected natural branches return to belief, they will be engrafted back into their own olive tree (vv. 23-24).

d. In the figure as explained by Paul, it is Israel who has been partly blinded until “the fullness of the Gentiles is brought in.” (v. 25).

f. Those warned against “being wise in [their] own conceits” (v. 25), are the same as those told neither to boast (v. 18), nor to be “highminded” (v. 20). These are identified as the Gentiles in v. 25.

g. Likewise, those, “natural branches,” some of whom were broken off through unbelief (v. 20), are distinguished from their olive tree (v. 24), (just as branches are distinguishable from any tree), are identified in verse 25 as Israel.

h. To make quite sure that no one supplants national Israel with some “spiritual Israel” Paul calls Israel by the name of Jacob (v. 26). This maintains the contrast between Israel and the Gentiles which the Apostle has set up throughout the chapter (see vv. 1-4, 7-14, 28-29).

i. The identification of the actual olive tree must have something to do with that which pertains to Israel as a nation. What is it that the apostle has had in mind all through chapter 11? The answer lies in verses 26-29. It refers to the salvation of Israel (“Jacob”) (vv.26-27a); in virtue of God’s covenant (v.27b); which was made with the fathers (v.28); and which covenant promises cannot be revoked (v.29). \*

In his recent Commentary on the Greek Text of Romans, veteran NT scholar Richard Longenecker writes,

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<sup>32</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God*, 188



[Paul] argues neither (1) that Gentiles are accepted by God by becoming Jewish proselytes... nor (2) that Jews are accepted by God by being united to the institution of the Christian church... Rather, Paul proclaims the following:

1. There continues to exist a “remnant within Israel,” even though the great majority of Jews have rejected Jesus as their Messiah and God has hardened their hearts.
2. There also exists at this present time a “remnant among the Gentiles.”
3. Following that time when “the full number of Gentiles has come in” – and particularly when “the Deliverer will come from Zion” – it will come about by divine action that “all Israel will be saved.”<sup>33</sup>

Longenecker continues by observing that,

Paul is not attempting to relate the Christian church to the nation of Israel; nor is he transferring God’s promises to Israel to the Christian church (but leaving his curses on Israel’s alone).<sup>34</sup>

He believes that God is concerned with forming an elect people for Himself. He does not, in the end, believe, as I do, in an enduring distinction between elect peoples. But his exegesis is not dictated by a prior commitment which has already drawn its conclusions. Therefore, he feels no pressure to import a hermeneutical

viewpoint to ensure that Paul makes Israel and the church one and the same thing, with Israel being the church with the Gentiles added (although in that case Israel is deluged and overwhelmed by Gentiles).

John Owen’s views on Israel and the church (although he doesn’t employ the olive tree figure in the two quotes I provided) reflects what I think is a theological predetermination which then translates into a hermeneutical utility when confronted by the olive tree, or indeed by the prophecies of the OT, or, for example, the Book of Revelation. It is this theological conformity which produces the sorts of supercessionisms I have been writing about.

Owen says that rather than looking for “carnal interest and privilege” the Jews came up against the requirement to give “a new account”, which was the essential transformation of its promises on the basis of moral and spiritual compulsion. But this ignores the very forthright demands for such moral and spiritual rectitude that are found in the very prophets, from Moses to Malachi, who gave these promises their original shape. What this approach does, among other things, is that it replaces the apparent purpose of the original communication and commutes it into our common era. As I have said before, this way of treating Scripture assumes that God was really speaking to *us*, not to the original audiences.

<sup>33</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 902

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 903

## 11. Gary Burge: Replacement Theologian

The name of Gary Burge of Wheaton College is familiar to many Christians who teach eschatology that includes the restoration of the remnant of the nation of Israel, but not for positive reasons. His positions on Israel, fueled in large part by his associations with the anti-Israel group [Kairos USA](#), Naim Ateek, Stephen Sizer, and Pro-Palestinianism in general, hardly encourage fuzzy feelings. On the theological front, Burge freely speaks of spiritualizing and reinterpreting Scripture. Not surprisingly, Burge is a convinced replacement theologian.

For as we shall see (and as commentators regularly show) while the land itself had a concrete application for most in Judaism, Jesus and his followers reinterpreted the promises that came to those in his kingdom.<sup>35</sup>

In this quote Burge claims that although the land given to Israel was “concrete” for Jews in ancient times, still the OT covenant promises to Israel were reinterpreted by Jesus. How were they reinterpreted? In an article written for the I. Howard Marshall festshrift, *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ*, (edited by Joel B. Green and Max Turner), Burge enlarges on this theme. His piece is entitled, “Territorial Religion, Johannine Christology, and the Vineyard of John 15.” In this article Burge starts off writing about the importance of land ownership in the ancient world (386). His introduction is a restatement of the work of

W.D. Davies’ called *The Gospel and the Land*. Basically, the idea is that in Jesus the “landless” become the “landed” and the other way round. There is very little appeal to Scripture in these pages (e.g. 384-388), and what is used is misused. But he procures a thesis:

For the most part the NT does not view The Land as the object of messianic promise. Typically, Stephen’s speech in Acts 7 seems to reject ‘land messianism’ outright. Revelation and salvation can be found anywhere from Egypt to Mesopotamia, according to Stephen.<sup>36</sup>

He continues by claiming that the Land is frequently “spiritualized” (his word), giving Hebrews 4 as an example, where, as Burge thinks, the land of Canaan as a type of heaven receives such treatment (Ibid). According to Burge,

John uses the concrete gifts of The Land (Jerusalem’s temple with its festivals, Israelite cities, and holy places) in order to show that what these places promise can be found in abundance in Christ... Jesus replaces the temple and its festivities as the place where God is revealed. Simply put, Jesus is the new “holy space” where God can be discovered.<sup>37</sup>

This sets him up for his study of the Vineyard in John 15. His approach is summarized when he says, “The crux for John 15 is that *Jesus is changing the place*

<sup>35</sup> Gary M. Burge, *Jesus and the Land*, 35

<sup>36</sup> Gary M. Burge, “Territorial Religion”, 388

<sup>37</sup> 388

of rootedness for Israel.” (393, emphasis in original). This means that instead of the land of Israel being the place of “revelation and salvation” and “rootedness”, these are to be found in the “one vine growing in [God’s] vineyard” (393), therefore, “Attachment to this vine and this vine alone gives the benefits of life once promised through The Land.” (394). From this theological springboard we are told that,

In a way reminiscent of diaspora Judaism, Jesus points away from the vineyard as place, as a territory of hills and valleys, cisterns and streams. In a word, Jesus spiritualizes The Land.<sup>38</sup>

No one will disagree that Jesus is the one vine through whom salvation comes, but whether this leads one to spiritualize the land (and the covenants) is another matter. Not surprisingly, Burge utilizes Mark 12:9 to teach that “Israel’s vineyard is devastated... [and] given to others” (396).

What is one to make of this? Well, the first thing that should be noticed is that Burge is at least candid enough to admit that this way of reading the Bible is spiritualizing. (Naturally, he claims this is what Jesus does). Secondly, the argument that Israel’s land has been replaced by and in Jesus is not made exegetically, but inferentially, with the help of evidence from the Jewish Diaspora – especially allegorizers like Philo. Thirdly, Burge’s contention depends on seeing the land of Israel as the place of “salvation and revelation.” But this is nonsense. The *land* is never viewed as the

place of salvation and revelation, and “the benefits of life once promised through the land” did not guarantee either; the land itself was never viewed as sacred as such. It is called “the Holy Land” (Zech. 2:12) in view of the eschaton. What was guaranteed is possession of the land in peace and prosperity (e.g. Deut. 4:29-31; 28:40-41, 44-45; 30:1-2, 10; Jer. 16:14-15; Ezek. 11:14-20; Amos 9:14-15 with Deut. 15:6; 28:1,13; Isa. 60:10-13; 62:1-12) *with salvation* (e.g. Isa. 45:17, 25; 49:5; Ezek. 36:22-29; Hos. 2:14-20).

God is always the locus of both salvation and revelation in the Bible. Whatismore, although there is a limited but necessary case for Jesus being identified with “Israel” (e.g. Isa. 49:1-8), it is a giant leap to turn Israel into Jesus the way Burge and most CT’s do. That switch can only be undertaken through a good deal of inference, and inferences can easily dictate hermeneutical choices:

Certainly, the more an interpretation depends on inferences (as opposed to explicit statements in the text), the less persuasive it is. If a historical reconstruction disturbs (rather than reinforces) the apparent meaning of a passage, we should be skeptical of it...A good criterion for assessing the validity as well as the value that a theory [i.e. a historical reconstruction ] may have for exegesis is to ask this question: Could the interpretation of a particular passage be supported even if we did not have the theory? A good interpretation should not depend so heavily on inferences that

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<sup>38</sup> (395, emphasis in original).

it cannot stand on its own without the help of a theoretical construct. A theory about the historical situation may help us to become sensitive to certain features of the text that we might otherwise ignore, but it is the text that must be ultimately determinative.<sup>39</sup>

I couldn't say it better myself. And even though the man who said it is a covenant theologian, he hits the nail squarely on the head. Turning the nation of Israel into Jesus, and importing liberal scholars such as W.D. Davies (and Walter Brueggemann), and then casting around for Philonic (and apocryphal) readings to shore up a certain understanding of John 15 is not the right way to read the biblical text. The premise that Jesus can stand for Israel in some texts (though not in many which CT's refer us to), and that the church is "in Him" does not logically connect to the conclusion that all the covenanted promises of God to the remnant of Israel are transmogrified and appropriated by the church.

## **12. Jesus is Israel (on rare occasions), but Israel isn't Jesus**

A derivation of the Jesus-is-Israel-is-the-church way of thinking is found in the statement of R. Scott Clark in Part Two of this series. Clark pointed to Genesis 3:15 and from it concluded that a permanent promise to a national people was contrary to that verse. He wrote,

the very category of "replacement" is foreign to Reformed theology

because it assumes a dispensational, Israeleo-centric way of thinking. It assumes that the temporary, national people was, in fact, intended to be the permanent arrangement. Such a way of thinking is contrary to the promise in Gen. 3:15. The promise was that there would be a Savior. The national people was only a means to that end, not an end in itself. According to Paul in Ephesians 2:11-22, in Christ the dividing wall has been destroyed. It cannot be rebuilt. The two peoples (Jews and Gentiles) have been made one in Christ. Among those who are united to Christ by grace alone, through faith alone, there is no Jew nor Gentile (Rom. 10:12; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11).

But Genesis 3:15 does not even mention a Savior! For sure, we know that Christ is the Seed, but that text is a threat directed to Satan that he is doomed. It says nothing about the status of national Israel in the plan of God. Clark's passages from Paul's epistles are true of the church, but they do not prove that the church is all there is. Yet this seems to be the motivating factor behind the various forms of supercessionism.

My stated intention in these posts is to try to settle whether or not it is proper to speak in terms of theologies of supercessionism or replacement theology. It is not my design to argue for the opposite view (which I have done many times before). I am coming towards the end of my article, with probably one post left to go. I said that I wanted to

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<sup>39</sup> – Moises Silva in Walter Kaiser & Moises Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (2nd edition), 179.

take a look at two OT passages to discover how those holding to one or more forms of supercessionism handle them.

### **13. *Jeremiah 31:31-37***

The first passage is the famous New covenant prophecy in Jeremiah 31:31-34. It involves a prediction of cleansing and salvation for Israel and Judah and their reunification. The passage is repeated in Hebrews 8:8-12. But attached to the original prophecy is a crystal clear guarantee that if man can tinker with the ordinances of creation, which stand fast (Psa. 33:9), “then the seed of Israel shall also cease from being a nation before Me forever.” (Jer. 31:36). That sounds like a rock solid affirmation of the perpetuity of the existence of Israel as a **nation!**

But God then underscores the promise by speaking of His secret counsels (cf. Deut. 29:29) in establishing the dimensions of the heavens and earth, and stating that if human beings can fathom them then Israel as a distinct people will be cast off for their disobedience (31:37). Yet this is exactly what several of the writers I have quoted have claimed.

How do covenant theologians (whose theology is usually identified with replacementism), deal with verses 35 to 37?

Gary DeMar writes,

*Jeremiah’s prophecy was given more than 2500 years ago. Prior to 1948 and after A.D. 70, Israel had not been a nation. So we have a few interpretive choices regarding the*

*Jeremiah passage: (1) God lied (impossible); (2) the promise was conditional (not likely); the promise was postponed (always the dispensationalist answer and untenable); (4) or the fulfillment was fulfilled in the new nation that grew out of the New Covenant made up of Jews and non-Jews (most likely). Consider what Jesus tells the religious leaders of His day:*

*“Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation, producing the fruit of it. And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust. When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them” (Matt. 21:43–45).<sup>40</sup>*

DeMar ignores the details of the vow God made and moves straight to sort through the alternatives as he envisions them, using Matthew 21:43-45 to transform the unconditional language of continuity (remember Jer. 33:37) into continual language threatening termination. The NT is brought in to nullify the solemn vow of God in the OT. Is that how Scripture should be used to interpret Scripture? One might employ a little irony here by pointing out that if one waits long enough God will change the apparent meaning of what He has said, no matter how strongly it was put, and the expectations will change along with it. As Michael Brown has observed in his

<sup>40</sup> <https://americanvision.org/5657/the-charge-of-replacement-theology-is-a-cover-for-fuzzy-theology/>



commentary on “Jeremiah” in the revised Expositor’s Bible Commentary, this dissolves any fixity of meaning in Divine Revelation. Can Jeremiah 31 really be redirected by Matthew 21? or is DeMar guilty of trivializing a Divine pledge?

Notice the equivocation on the word “nation” in DeMar. When he writes of a “new nation” growing out of the New covenant does he reference the promise of national and ethnic permanence which accompany it? He does not. Israel the nation becomes “Israel” the “nation.”

#### **14. Jeremiah 33:14-26**

As if to drive His covenant dependability home, this long section, which begins with a prediction of the Messianic rule from Jerusalem (not New Jerusalem) over a righteous earth, proceeds with a promise that the Davidic covenant and the ministration of the Levites (doubtless related to the covenant with Phinehas in Num. 25:10-13) will continue (33:17-18). This is followed by avowals of fidelity to the Davidic covenant and the Priestly covenant based on God’s constancy to the Noahic covenant (cf. Gen.8:21-22) and then the creation ordinances (Jer. 33:19-22).

What appears next is most informative for our discussion:

Have you not considered what these people have spoken, saying, ‘The two families which the LORD has chosen, He has also cast them off’? Thus they have despised My people,

as if they should no more be a nation before them. – Jeremiah 33:24

In replacement theology, the very thing that is at issue is the continuance of Israel *as a nation*. And that is what this form of theology denies. Another instance of this is when John Frame expressly says that through unbelief Israel “lost its special status as God’s elect nation.”<sup>41</sup>

Jeremiah closes off his chapter by reiterating the fixity of God’s purposes for ethnic Israel (33:25-26). How do CT’s respond to such a God-proffered bond? I’m afraid they regularly ignore Jeremiah 33:14-26 completely. But there it sits, witnessing against them.

Just to make the point even more, allow me to reproduce a few other samples. In another book Frame writes,

The promises given to Israel are fulfilled to us in Christ... We are the heirs of Israel... Indeed, we are the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16). Paul even describes Gentile Christians as wild branches grafted into the tree of Israel in place of the unbelieving branches that have been cast out.”<sup>42</sup>

And Anglican theologian Michael Bird writes in a similar vein:

In sum, the promise of a universal blessing made to Abraham and inherited by Israel is fulfilled in the church of Jesus Christ, which constitutes the elect from every nation.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> *The Doctrine of God*, 49 n. 3

<sup>42</sup> John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 75

<sup>43</sup> Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 715



This is then smoothed over with some soft words:

The existence of the church, then, is not an abandonment of God's promises to Israel; rather, it is the remnant chosen by grace, which is the first order proof of his faithfulness to Israel.<sup>44</sup>

But how can this be squared with God's language in Jeremiah 31 and 33? These statements are perhaps the two most strongly worded promises in the entire Bible! How can they be circumvented? Several things to notice in the above quotes: 1. Frame uses a proof-text (Gal.6:16) whose support for his position is very questionable (and at the very least debatable). 2. He wrongly (though not untypically for CT's) refers to the olive tree in Romans 11 as Israel, when the native branches are Israel. 3. Bird uses the third part of the Abrahamic covenant to completely swamp the first two promises (i.e. of national and territorial inheritance).

### **15. The Organic Route Won't Work**

I have said that those CT's who are more careful cannot break free from Jeremiah. The great Geerhardus Vos wrote,

It is one church that is built on the foundation of the prophets and the apostles; as a matter of course the spiritual Israel, the true Israel, grows out of Israel according to the flesh.<sup>45</sup>

You cannot have a non-Israelite nation grow out of the Israelite nation. You cannot

rename the church "true Israel" without coming up against God's solemn promises to the "old" nation of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Jer. 33:26), which God fully intends to renew and restore to their land (cf. Ezek. 37:14, 21-28).



Source: [SpiritAndTruth.org](http://SpiritAndTruth.org)

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 716

<sup>45</sup> – Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 5, 297