The Church and Israel: Replacement Theology

Systematic Theology VI: Ecclesiology & Eschatology · Lecture 2 of 10

C. Michael Patton, Th.M., and Rhome Dyke, Th.M. · The Theology Program · 74 minutes

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Lecture by C. Michael Patton, Th.M., and Rhome Dyke, Th.M., from The Theology Program, published on their public channel. Study notes from Medina Community Church.

BEFORE YOU WATCH

Most students walk in believing in a rapture, a tribulation, a literal millennium, and an antichrist, and have never once been exposed to an alternative. This session introduces the view that held the church for most of its history: that Israel has no future distinct from the church, because the church is Israel. The teachers ask the class to set their traditions down and give it a fair hearing. Listen for the servant named Eliezer in Genesis 15; the teachers say he is going to matter for the rest of the course.

STUDY SHEET

1. The question beneath the end times

The session opens where the course began: whatever you do with the church and its relationship to Israel will determine your view of the end times. Why do people say a millennium is necessary at all? To fulfill the promises made to Israel through Abraham, and the Davidic promise of 2 Samuel 7 that David would never lack a man on the throne. The view introduced tonight says none of that requires a future millennium: when the church came, it fulfilled the promises of Israel, Christ reigns now in the hearts of believers who are the church, and the promises are fulfilled spiritually. So the millennium, on this view, is simply not necessary.

2. Naming the view fairly

The view is often called covenant theology, but the teachers deliberately call it replacement theology, because covenant theology covers more than this one claim. For two weeks the course examines the relationship of Israel to the church, replacement theology this week and dispensationalism the next, and the teachers set the ground rules: clear your mind of the millennium you were taught, enter church history, and give the position its fair shot before poking holes in it. They are candid that this issue confuses them too, that students need not leave a ten out of ten on it, and that some tension is healthy once you discover how many great figures of the past will end up disagreeing with most people in the room. Both camps also contain many internal varieties; the course deals with the core issue only: Israel is in the Old Testament, the church is in the New, and the question is the relationship.

3. What reformed means, one doctrine at a time

A clarifying detour: the word reformed means different things in different doctrines. In soteriology, reformed means Calvinistic, unconditional election. In ecclesiology, reformed means covenant theology, which divides the Bible under two covenants and holds a replacement view of Israel. In eschatology, reformed usually means amillennialism, a term the course will define later. The pieces can come apart: James Boice was reformed in soteriology and ecclesiology yet premillennial. Historically they traveled as a package, and the most common divergence today is to be reformed in soteriology but not in ecclesiology and eschatology. The teachers place the discussion in the Reformation itself, when the Protestant movement re-evaluated every doctrine while Rome re-addressed its own at the Council of Trent; on these questions Rome sits with the reformed view. Dispensationalism arises centuries later, its name traced to the King James rendering of a Greek word in Ephesians as dispensation. And they offer an honest sociological note: theologians and scholars, Millard Erickson and Wayne Grudem among the examples, along with Anglicans like J. I. Packer and John Stott, mostly hold the replacement side, while dispensationalism has been more a view of pastors and lay people, Charles Ryrie standing as its scholarly exception in the discussion.

4. The Abrahamic covenant: Genesis slams the brakes

The covenants must come before the debate. Genesis is not an exhaustive history; after the fall it follows what God is doing to redeem man, racing through millennia until, at the end of chapter 11, it stops at one genealogy and one man. Genesis 12 opens with a promise out of nowhere, no explanation given: leave your country, and I will make you a great nation, bless those who bless you, curse the one who curses you, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed. The teachers call Genesis 12 the verse the whole Old Testament stands on: everything after it is about Israel, from Israel, or affecting Israel, and the rest of the Old Testament is the fulfillment of this covenant. The covenant's three parts: an eternal inheritance of land, a posterity as numerous as the sands, and blessing to all peoples through Abraham.

5. Genesis 15: Eliezer, the stars, and how shall I know

In Genesis 15 the promise is restated, and Abraham raises the obvious problem: he is childless, and the heir of his house is Eliezer of Damascus, his servant, the legal heir custom provided when there was no son. Abraham is offering God an alternative, an heir who is legal but not of his blood, not of his seed, and God says no: this man will not be your heir. The teachers tell the class to remember Eliezer for the rest of the course. Then the stars: so shall your descendants be, and Abraham believed the LORD, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. But Abraham asks one more question: how am I to know that I will possess this land? God's answer is the strangest scene in the chapter.

6. The covenant ritual God walked alone

God commands animals cut in two and laid opposite each other, the ancient ritual of covenant: normally both parties walked between the pieces, each saying in effect, if I break this covenant, may I become as these animals. God is condescending to a ceremony Abraham knew well, the way a boundary dispute with a neighbor was settled. But Abraham never walks through. A deep sleep and terror fall on him, God foretells the four hundred years of slavery and the return in the fourth generation, when the iniquity of the Amorites is complete, and then a smoking oven and a flaming torch pass between the pieces alone. God, and God alone, binds himself: no stipulations rest on Abraham, and the land is specified from the river of Egypt to the great river Euphrates. It is like a contract naming two parties that only one of them signs. The covenant is reiterated in Genesis 17 and again after the offering of Isaac. The teachers are direct: a large part of your ecclesiology and eschatology is sitting right here in Genesis 15.

7. The Mosaic covenant: the dual signing at Sinai

The second great covenant is the one everybody agrees is conditional. After the four hundred years and the exodus, Israel stands at the base of Sinai and Moses goes up. God has been waiting to say this: you saw what I did to Egypt, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself; now, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. And unlike Genesis 15, this covenant has a dual signing: all the people answered together, all that the LORD has spoken we will do. The covenant's content, blessing for obedience and curses for disobedience, then fills roughly an eighth of the Bible. Four chapters, the teachers say, trace the covenants that carry the whole story: Genesis 12, Exodus 19, 2 Samuel 7, and Jeremiah 31.

8. The Davidic covenant and the dynasty problem

The third covenant, again unconditional on all sides of the debate: God promises David in 2 Samuel 7 that his son will build a house for God's name, and that God will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. Solomon builds the temple, but the promise runs beyond Solomon: from David's line a kingdom established for all the ages. The teachers linger on what that promise meant to a king. Every dynasty in recorded history, whatever the empire, eventually runs out of sons; a perpetual line would itself be a miracle. David would naturally have heard the promise as son after son after son, and instead it is fulfilled by one person who lives eternally, which is more magnificent than what David could have imagined, not less. Christ stands inside the first covenant as the blessing to all families, and inside this third one as the son who reigns forever.

9. The new covenant of Jeremiah 31

The fourth covenant is the most elusive: an unconditional promise of a new way of relating to God, forgiveness of sins by a change from within. Jeremiah 31 announces days coming when God will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant made when he took them by the hand out of Egypt, the covenant they broke though he was a husband to them. To Jeremiah's hearers the old covenant could only mean the Mosaic one. The new covenant's terms: I will put my law within them and write it on their heart; I will be their God and they shall be my people; no one will need to say know the LORD, for they shall all know me, from the least to the greatest; and I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more. In context, the teachers grant plainly, it is written to Israel. The law that had always stood outside them would be written inside them.

10. One chart, four covenants, three camps

A chart lays the positions side by side. On the Abrahamic covenant, classic and progressive dispensationalists agree: unconditional, with a future fulfillment for ethnic Israel still outstanding. Replacement theology divides: some hold an unconditional covenant now fulfilled spiritually through the church, the land either literal in the new heavens and new earth or symbolic, since the church inhabits every land; others say Israel forfeited it, the conditionality implied through the Mosaic extension or through circumcision, which was always meant to be a matter of the heart. On the Mosaic covenant everyone agrees: conditional. On the Davidic, classic dispensationalists see a future fulfillment in the millennium, some older writers even expecting David himself to reign on the basis of passages in Isaiah and Ezekiel, most expecting Christ on the throne; progressives see an inaugurated fulfillment now, Christ reigning from David's throne in heaven over the church, plus a literal future fulfillment, the pattern theologians call the already and the not yet; replacement theology sees the current fulfillment as Christ reigning in the hearts of believers. On the new covenant, classic dispensationalists place fulfillment with Israel after the tribulation, progressives see current fulfillment with the church and future fulfillment with ethnic Israel, and replacement theology sees fulfillment with the church alone. History presses in on the chart: the temple fell in AD 70, the people were scattered, and they were out of the land until 1948, when a reborn nation sent everyone back to reread Genesis 12 and 15 and ask whether the end times had begun. Even how you read world history depends on where you land here.

11. Replacement theology in church history

Replacement theology was the theology of the early church and remained the majority view of all church history into the nineteenth century. The teachers reconstruct how the thinking formed: Israel rejected and crucified her Messiah, the sign over the cross reading king of the Jews, the temple was destroyed in AD 70 with horrifying slaughter, the people were scattered, and a church once primarily Jewish became primarily Gentile and centered on the Roman world. Watching that history, the conclusion seemed to write itself: they turned their back on him, and he has set them aside. The early writings say it explicitly: the Shepherd of Hermas simply calls the church Israel; the Epistle of Barnabas says Israel has been disinherited; Justin Martyr and Origen call the church the true Israel; Tertullian, reading Genesis 25 allegorically, says the older must serve the younger, Israel must serve the church. Constantine enacted policies against the Jews in the early fourth century on the charge that they were Christ's killers, and Luther himself, in one writing the teachers say he is rightly condemned for, turned viciously against the Jews, a text some appealed to as recently as the controversy over the film The Passion.

12. What replacement theology does and does not say

The teachers then work hard to prevent a slander. Replacement theologians today would never advocate what Constantine or Luther said, and they do not blame the Jews for the death of Christ; they blame themselves, and all sinners. That some people in history held this theology and hated Israel does not make the theology anti-Jewish, and no one should choose a position by such an association. The position itself: the church is made up of all the people of God of all time; Israel has been replaced, or superseded, by the church as the people of God; and the church inherits the promises of Israel, so that Jewish people inherit those promises too, on a greater scale than before, precisely by being integrated into the church. Its adherents include Presbyterians, Anglicans, Methodists, Roman Catholics, and most reformed theologians. The diagram is one unbroken line: one people of God, revealed as Israel in the Old Testament and carried into the church in the New; and the timeline runs Old Testament age, New Testament age, second coming, new heavens and new earth, with no rapture and no millennium between. And the teachers pause on something worth noticing: the definitions of the church from week one turn out to be conclusions. How you settle Israel and the church is what defines the church.

13. The four defenses from Scripture

First, the Abrahamic covenant is fulfilled by the church. Galatians 3 says that in Christ Jesus, writing to primarily Gentile churches, you are all sons of God through faith; there is neither Jew nor Greek; and if you belong to Christ, you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise. Earlier in the chapter, those who believe are sons of Abraham, and Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham: all the nations will be blessed in you. Romans 9 adds that not all who are descended from Israel are truly Israel, though the teachers concede it is not the strongest text for the claim. Ephesians 3 announces the secret hidden from former generations, unknown even to Abraham and David: that through the gospel the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the body, partakers of the promise. On this reading the promise is not narrowed but expanded, greater than Abraham imagined. Second, the Davidic covenant is fulfilled in Christ's present reign: the kingdom of God is a current reality represented by the church, Hebrews 8 places our high priest seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and when Christ sent out the seventy in Luke 10 he told them to announce that the kingdom of God had come upon their hearers. One eternal king is a greater fulfillment than an endless line of mortal sons. Third, Christ instituted the new covenant with the church: this cup is the new covenant, spoken to apostles who represent both Israel and the church; Paul calls himself a servant of a new covenant to the Gentile Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 3; and Hebrews 8 says that in speaking of a new covenant God has made the first obsolete. Fourth, the weight of history: from Justin Martyr and Irenaeus down past the Reformation, this was the church's primary view, and the teachers warn against tossing that tradition off lightly.

14. The dispensationalist responses

To the first defense: the blessing to all nations genuinely does include the church, so every believer can sing Father Abraham and mean it; we are heirs according to promise, but heirs of the part of the promise we could inherit. The promises of the land and the seed, they argue, can only be fulfilled through ethnic Israel, and Genesis 15 names the land's boundaries too specifically to be spiritualized; and remember Eliezer, the legal heir God refused. To the second: Christ is never said to be seated on the throne of David, but at the right hand of God; the kingdom was present in Christ and would have remained had Israel received her Messiah; and in Acts 1 the apostles ask whether he is at this time restoring the kingdom to Israel, and Jesus does not correct the question, he says it is not for you to know the times or epochs the Father has fixed, a passage the teachers call very difficult for replacement theology. To the third: dispensationalists vary, some older classic writers holding to two new covenants, one for Israel and one for the church, progressives holding to one new covenant extended to a church of Jews and Gentiles; both agree the new covenant renders the Mosaic covenant obsolete, never the Abrahamic, which remains in effect. To the fourth: majority is not truth; the majority of church history also believed in baptismal regeneration, and Protestants break with tradition there without apology.

15. Why you have never heard all this

If replacement theology owned most of church history, why is this the first time most of the class has heard of it? Two honest answers. The rebirth of Israel in 1948 made people read the covenants differently and popularized the dispensational alternative. And, the teachers admit carefully, dispensationalism is sensational, and sensational things sell: a rapture, an antichrist, a seven year tribulation give a teacher far more material, and far more to alarm people with, than a simple second coming. The next session gives dispensationalism its own fair hearing.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Genesis 12 · Genesis 15 · Genesis 17 · Genesis 22 · Genesis 25 · Exodus 19 · 2 Samuel 7 · Jeremiah 31 · Luke 10 · Luke 22 · Acts 1 · Romans 9 · 2 Corinthians 3 · Galatians 3 · Ephesians 3 · Hebrews 8

KEY TERMS

Replacement theology

: The teaching, also called supersessionism, that the church is made up of all the people of God of all time, that Israel has been replaced by the church as the people of God, and that the church inherits the promises of Israel. The course uses this name rather than covenant theology, which covers more ground.

Covenant theology

: The reformed system that reads the Bible under two covenants and holds a replacement view of Israel and the church. Its adherents include Presbyterians, Anglicans, Methodists, Roman Catholics, and most reformed theologians.

Dispensationalism

: The view that Israel and the church remain distinct, with promises of land and seed still awaiting fulfillment through ethnic Israel. A development of recent centuries, its name traced to the King James rendering of a Greek word in Ephesians as dispensation.

Reformed

: A word with three senses in this course: in soteriology it means Calvinistic, in ecclesiology it means covenant theology, and in eschatology it usually means amillennialism. The senses can come apart, as in James Boice, reformed in the first two and premillennial in the third.

Abrahamic covenant

God's promise to Abraham of an eternal inheritance of land, a posterity as numerous as the sands, and blessing to all peoples through him, given in Genesis 12 and sealed in Genesis 15 by a ritual God performed alone.

Mosaic covenant

The conditional covenant made at Sinai in Exodus 19, promising blessing for obedience to the law and curses for disobedience, and signed on both sides: all that the LORD has spoken we will do.

Davidic covenant

God's unconditional promise in 2 Samuel 7 that David's house and throne would be established forever, fulfilled beyond every dynasty in history by one Son who lives eternally.

New covenant

The unconditional promise of Jeremiah 31: the law written within, on the heart, all knowing the LORD, and sins forgiven and remembered no more. Written in context to the house of Israel and Judah, and announced by Christ over the cup.

The already and the not yet

The theological shorthand for an inaugurated fulfillment: a promise genuinely being fulfilled now, with a fuller, literal fulfillment still to come, as progressive dispensationalists read the Davidic and new covenants.

Supersessionism

Another name for replacement theology: the church has superseded Israel as the people of God, and the promises made to Israel now apply to the church.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

Answer each question, then check yourself against the key at the end of this section.

1. Why do some say a future millennium is theologically necessary?
   - A. Because the church fathers unanimously demanded it
   - B. So that the promises made to Israel through Abraham, and the Davidic promise of a throne, can be fulfilled
   - C. Because Rome defined it at the Council of Trent
   - D. Because the Gospels describe it in detail

2. Why do the teachers call this week's view replacement theology rather than covenant theology?
   - A. Because covenant theology no longer exists
   - B. Because the two names are interchangeable in every respect
   - C. Because covenant theology covers more than this one claim about Israel and the church
   - D. Because replacement is the older term

3. What does reformed usually mean in each of the three doctrines?
   - A. Calvinistic in soteriology, covenant theology in ecclesiology, and usually amillennialism in eschatology
   - B. Lutheran in soteriology, Baptist in ecclesiology, premillennial in eschatology
   - C. It means the same single thing in every doctrine
   - D. It refers only to the sixteenth century

4. What does the example of James Boice illustrate?

A. That no one can hold reformed views consistently

B. That premillennialism requires Arminian soteriology

C. That eschatology is decided by denomination

D. That the reformed package can come apart: he was reformed in soteriology and ecclesiology yet premillennial

5. Why do the teachers call Genesis 12 the basis of the whole Old Testament?

A. Because it is the first chapter of the Bible

B. Because everything after it is about Israel, from Israel, or affecting Israel, and the rest of the Old Testament fulfills this covenant

C. Because it contains the ten commandments

D. Because it describes the building of the temple

6. Who was Eliezer of Damascus, and why must the class remember him?

A. A prophet who anointed David

B. The king of the Amorites

C. Abraham's servant and legal heir, the alternative Abraham offered God, and God said no: the heir would be of Abraham's own seed

D. The builder of the first altar at Bethel

7. In the covenant ritual of Genesis 15, what is the significance of who passed between the pieces?

A. Both parties passed through, making the covenant mutual

B. Abraham passed through alone, taking the obligation on himself

C. No one passed through; the ritual was abandoned

D. God alone passed through, binding himself alone to fulfill the covenant, with no stipulations resting on Abraham

8. How does the Mosaic covenant differ in form from the Abrahamic?

A. It was made with Egypt rather than Israel

B. It had a dual signing: God stated conditions and all the people answered, all that the LORD has spoken we will do

C. It was never written down

D. It contained no blessings or curses

9. What point do the teachers draw from the history of dynasties?

A. Every dynasty eventually runs out of sons, so the Davidic promise is fulfilled more magnificently than David imagined: not an endless line, but one Son who lives eternally

B. Ancient dynasties lasted forever, proving the promise ordinary

C. David expected the promise to fail

D. The promise concerned Egypt's throne rather than Israel's

10. What are the terms of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31?

A. A rebuilt temple and restored sacrifices

B. A new set of laws written on stone

C. The law written within, on the heart, all knowing the LORD from least to greatest, and sins forgiven and remembered no more

D. A covenant made only with the nations

11. On the chart of positions, what do all camps agree about the Mosaic covenant?

A. That it was unconditional

B. That it was conditional

C. That it was never actually made

D. That it applies only to the church

12. What is the already and the not yet, as used of the Davidic covenant?

A. The claim that the covenant was already broken and will not be restored

B. A description of the two advents of Elijah

C. The rule that prophecy has no present relevance

D. The progressive dispensational reading: an inaugurated fulfillment now, Christ reigning from David's throne in heaven, with a literal future fulfillment still to come

13. Why did 1948 reignite this whole discussion?

A. Because the church councils reconvened that year

B. Because the temple was rebuilt

C. Because Israel returned to the land after the scattering of AD 70, sending everyone back to reread Genesis 12 and 15 and ask whether the end times had begun

D. Because dispensationalism was invented that year

14. Which early writings explicitly identify the church with Israel?

A. The Shepherd of Hermas calls the church Israel, the Epistle of Barnabas says Israel is disinherited, and Justin Martyr and Origen call the church the true Israel

B. The four Gospels

C. The Council of Nicaea's creed

D. The letters of Ignatius alone

15. What caution do the teachers labor to make about replacement theology and the Jewish people?

A. That the theology requires blaming the Jews for the cross

B. That replacement theologians today do not blame the Jews and would never advocate what Constantine or Luther said; no one should choose a position by such an association

C. That the history contains no shameful chapters

D. That only dispensationalists have ever mistreated anyone

16. How does Galatians 3 function in the replacement defense?

A. It predicts the rebuilding of the temple

B. It commands Gentile circumcision

C. It limits the promise to ethnic Israel

D. It says believers in Christ, Gentiles included, are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise, so the church inherits the Abrahamic promise

17. How do dispensationalists answer the appeal to Acts 1?

A. They deny the apostles asked about the kingdom

B. They say the kingdom had already been restored at Pentecost

C. The apostles asked whether he was restoring the kingdom to Israel, and Jesus did not correct the question but said the times were not theirs to know, a hard passage for replacement theology

D. They say the passage concerns Rome, not Israel

18. How do dispensationalists answer the argument from church history?

A. They concede the argument settles the matter

B. Majority is not truth: most of church history also believed in baptismal regeneration, and Protestants break with tradition there too

C. They deny replacement theology was ever the majority view

D. They appeal to the Council of Trent

19. Why, according to the teachers, is dispensationalism better known today despite its shorter history?

A. Because every seminary requires it

B. Because replacement theology was outlawed

C. Because the creeds teach it explicitly

D. Because 1948 popularized it, and because a rapture, an antichrist, and a tribulation are sensational, giving teachers more material and more to alarm people with than a simple second coming

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 C · 3 A · 4 D · 5 B · 6 C · 7 D · 8 B · 9 A · 10 C · 11 B · 12 D · 13 C · 14 A · 15 B · 16 D · 17 C · 18 B · 19 D

TALK IT OVER

1. Before this session, had you ever heard that most of church history held a view of Israel and the church different from the one you were taught? What does it do to you to discover that, and how do you weigh a strong tradition against your own reading of Scripture?

2. God alone passed between the pieces in Genesis 15. Sit with that scene: what difference does it make to you that the covenant's fulfillment rests on God's faithfulness and not on Abraham's, and where do you need that same assurance this week?

3. The teachers admit that sensational teaching sells. Where have you seen end times teaching driven more by excitement or fear than by careful reading of the covenants, and how can you study these questions without either the sensationalism or the cynicism?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

Genesis 15 holds the scene the whole debate returns to: when the sun had set, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the pieces, and on that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, promising the land to his offspring.