

SUPERSESSIONISM, ENGRAFTMENT, AND JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE: REFLECTIONS ON THE PRESBYTERIAN STATEMENT ON JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

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PRECIS

In 1987, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved a study document that proposed a new theological understanding of the relationship between Christians and Jews. Instead of the traditional Christian idea that Christians have replaced Jews in the latter's relationship with God, the document proposed that Christians are engrafted into the covenant without the Jews' thereby being excluded from it. The document claimed that the idea that Christians have superseded Jews is a construction of the second century, so it is not normative for Christian theology. This article examines passages in the letters of Ignatius, in the Gospel of Matthew, and in the letters of Paul; it concludes to the contrary that, in different ways, each of these sources holds that those who do not believe in Jesus have excluded themselves from the covenant and that their place has been taken by those who do believe in him. The Presbyterian document exhibits a commendable ecumenical sensitivity and calls for repudiating anti-Jewish stereotypes among Christians, but it also misrepresents the attitudes toward post-biblical Judaism that are found in early Christianity; thus, it does not enhance contemporary understanding between Christians and Jews.

Introduction

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved in 1987 a document entitled *A Theological Understanding of the Relationship between Christians and Jews*.¹ Subtitled "A Paper Commended to the Church

¹(New York: Office of the General Assembly, 1987). The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is the largest American Presbyterian denomination.

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for Study and Reflection," this document proposed a new understanding of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. In place of the traditional idea that Christians have replaced or superseded Jews in their covenant with God, the document proposed a concept of engraftment, according to which Christians are incorporated into God's covenant with Israel without the Jews' thereby being rejected. The Presbyterian document emerged from the experiences of members of that denomination and others in Jewish-Christian dialogue, and sensitivity to ecumenical issues is reflected throughout. It states:

In the course of addressing this subject, our church has come to see many things in a new light. This study has helped us to feel the pain of our Jewish neighbors who remember that the Holocaust was carried out in the heart of "Christian Europe" by persons many of whom were baptized Christians. We have come to understand in a new way how our witness to the gospel can be perceived by Jews as an attempt to erode and ultimately to destroy their own communities.²

A Theological Understanding was not adopted as an official position paper on Jewish-Christian relationships but was intended instead to be a document for study by Presbyterians, "an invitation to shared theological reflection."³ This article describes the most important theological affirmations of the Presbyterian document, examines its proposed theology of Judaism and Christianity, and evaluates its overall contributions to Jewish-Christian dialogue and understanding.

I. The Document and Its Affirmations

A Theological Understanding is the culmination of a study that began in 1981 in the Presbyterian Church in the United States, one of the two denominations that merged in 1983 to form the present Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The document itself was drafted by a ten-member committee appointed by the denomination's Council on Theology and Culture. The committee's draft was revised by the Council and by the 1987 General Assembly. The General Assembly adopted the revised paper and directed that it be distributed within the church, together with a brief study guide. The study guide that accompanies the paper was prepared by Frank T. Hainer of the denomination's Program Agency. Copies of the document were distributed to each minister, educator, and congregation in the denomination. Individuals and congregations were urged to study and respond to the document.

The text of the document is divided into "Affirmations" and "Explications." Seven theological affirmations about the relationship between Christians and Jews are presented, each followed by several paragraphs of

²Ibid., p. 3.

³Ibid., p. 21.

interpretation. In this section we will describe the paper's affirmations about Christian evangelization and Jewish-Christian dialogue and its central proposals about the theological relationship between Christians and Jews.

A. Covenantal Status and Christian Witness

The document's first affirmation states, "We affirm that the living God whom Christians worship is the same God who is worshiped and served by Jews";⁴ the fourth affirmation declares, "When speaking with Jews about matters of faith, we must acknowledge that Jews are already in a covenantal relationship with God."⁵ These statements establish the document's controlling premise that Jews genuinely worship, and remain in covenant with, God. Recognizing that there are unbridgeable differences between the faith of the church and that of the synagogue, the authors seek to affirm the former without denying the validity of the latter. The first affirmation concludes, "We bear witness that the God revealed in Jesus, a Jew, to be the Triune Lord of All, is the same one disclosed in the life and worship of Israel." Throughout the explication of this affirmation the Jewishness of Jesus is emphasized, as is the common faith of Jews and Christians in "one God whose loving and just will is for the redemption of mankind."⁶

There appears to be a tension between the document's affirmation that Jews actually worship and serve God and its recognition of the Christian responsibility to bear witness to all people, including the Jews. The document recognizes the unique revelation that occurred in Jesus Christ: "Jesus had become Messiah and Lord, God's anointed who has inaugurated the kingdom of peace and righteousness through his life, death, and resurrection. . . . Jesus, a Jew, is the being and power of God for the redemption of the world. In him, God is disclosed to be the Triune One who creates and reconciles all things."⁷ Yet, it does not appear that faith in Jesus is especially important; indeed, the sense one gets throughout the document is that God accomplished a unique act of redemption and revelation in the coming of Jesus, an act that is effective both for those who believe that it occurred and for those who do not.⁸

The authors affirm the Christian belief that the church has a duty to evangelize, but they seem not to know how to reconcile this with their statements about the status of the Jews. The document rejects the idea that "all Jews ought properly to become baptized members of the church,"⁹ and states: "Dialogue is the appropriate form of faithful conversation between

⁴Ibid., p. 7.

⁵Ibid., p. 10.

⁶Ibid., p. 8.

⁷Ibid., pp. 7-8.

⁸The study guide asks, "What are the Christian grounds for redemption?" The conclusion that the author intends us to reach is clear: "if we say grace and not works or belief, how can we categorically claim that God has rejected anyone?" Despite the study guide's denial that this is a necessary conclusion (p. 28), universalism seems to be implied throughout the document.

⁹*A Theological Understanding*, p. 11.

Christians and Jews. Dialogue is not a cover for proselytism.”¹⁰ The final word on the document’s second affirmation is one of uncertainty: “We do not claim to fathom this mystery but we cannot ignore it. At the same time we can never forget that we stand in a covenant established by Jesus Christ (Hebrews 8) and that faithfulness to that covenant requires us to call *all* women and men to faith in Jesus Christ. We ponder the work of God. . . .”¹¹

B. Supersessionism and Engraftment

The second and third affirmations and their explications present the central theses of the Presbyterian document. The text of these affirmations follows:

2. We affirm that the church, elected in Jesus Christ, has been engrafted into the people of God established by the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Therefore, Christians have not replaced Jews.¹²

3. We affirm that both the church and the Jewish people are elected by God for witness to the world and that the relationship of the church to contemporary Jews is based on that gracious and irrevocable election of both.¹³

The document defines the terms used in these affirmations. “Jews” are those persons who understand themselves to be the descendants of the biblical patriarchs and matriarchs; converts into the Jewish community are also included.¹⁴ Although “Judaism” is defined as “the religion of the Jews,” no particular beliefs or practices are entailed by this definition: “We recognize that Jews are varied in the observance of their religion, and that there are many Jews who do not practice Judaism at all.”¹⁵ The document uses “Israel” and not “Jews” to refer to the Hebrews of the biblical period, but, as we shall see below, it will repeatedly assert that post-biblical Jews stand in essential continuity with biblical Israel and are the latter’s spiritual successors.¹⁶

The document proposes that the relationship between Christians and Jews should be understood in terms of “engraftment,” according to which Christians have joined Jews in the latter’s relationship with God: “We must always acknowledge that Jews are already in a covenantal relationship with God.”¹⁷ The authors reject the traditional Christian view, called “superses-

¹⁰Ibid., p. 12.

¹¹Ibid., p. 9.

¹²Ibid., p. 8.

¹³Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁴The definition does not say so, but presumably the children of converts are also considered to be Jews.

¹⁵*A Theological Understanding*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁶The paragraph dealing with definitions seems to distinguish between rabbinic Judaism and the “Judaism of late antiquity,” from which both rabbinic Judaism and Christianity have sprung (ibid., p. 4). This distinction does not seem to be followed elsewhere in the document, however, where “Judaism” seems to mean the religion of post-biblical Jews without distinction between its earlier and its rabbinic forms.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 10.

sionism,” which holds that the church has replaced the Jews in the covenant: “The church has not ‘replaced’ the Jewish people. Quite the contrary! the church . . . has been engrafted into the people of God by the covenant with Abraham.”¹⁸ Although the authors concede that supersessionism has biblical and theological bases and has dominated the Christian tradition,¹⁹ it is labeled a creation of the second century, “based on the reading of some biblical texts and nurtured in controversy.”²⁰ The claim that the relationship of Christians to Jews should be seen as one of engraftment rather than one of supersession is the most important proposal of the Presbyterian document and will receive the greatest attention below.

II. Supersessionism and Engraftment in Early Christianity

A fundamental claim of *A Theological Understanding* is that supersessionism is a post-biblical doctrine, a second-century construction that is “based on the reading of some biblical texts and nurtured in controversy.”²¹ If this were the case, and if it were true that engraftment represents the apostolic understanding of the relationship of Christianity to Judaism, then the document’s argument would be very strong indeed. In the following pages we will examine the evidence that supersessionism is a late creation that, as such, ought not be regarded by Christians as they seek to construct a theological understanding of Judaism and the Jews.

A. Supersessionism and Engraftment in Ignatius

It is clear that, by the second century, supersessionism had become a dominant way of understanding the relationship of Christians and Jews. An early instance of this may be found in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch, who, during the first decade of the second century, claimed to be the bishop of Antioch in Syria. Sometime during the reign of Trajan, Ignatius was transported in chains from Antioch toward Rome, where he ardently expected to be martyred. On the way he wrote five letters to churches in Asia Minor whose leaders he had met on his journey. Two additional letters were written to the church of Rome and to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna.²²

There are several references to Judaism in Ignatius’s letters, but the “Judaism” with which he was concerned was the observance of Jewish practices by gentile Christians. He wrote to the Philadelphians: “If anyone preaches

¹⁸Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., p. 8.

²¹Ibid.

²²For readily available introductions to Ignatius and translations of his letters, see Cyril C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 74-120; and J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (London: Macmillan, 1891 [repr.: Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1956]), pp. 55-88.

Judaism to you, pay no attention to him. For it is better to hear about Christianity from one of the circumcision than Judaism from a Gentile" (6:1). Ignatius warned the Magnesians, "if we still go on observing Judaism, we admit we never received grace" (8:1).

It is important to note that Ignatius directed none of this polemic against non-Christian Jews. He believed firmly that Christianity, not Judaism, was the successor to the religion of the Hebrew Bible. He wrote in reference to Jewish converts to Christianity, "Christianity did not believe in Judaism, but Judaism in Christianity" (*Magnesians* 10:3). Indeed, Ignatius appears to have had no awareness of post-biblical Judaism as a continuing tradition. He knew of the prophets (*Magnesians* 8:2) but apparently not of the rabbis. Ignatius had no concept of engraftment at all, and supersessionism was clearly in control: For him, Judaism was simply an outmoded religion, to be spoken of only in the past tense. The Presbyterian document is correct in finding supersessionism in the second century,²³ but, as we have seen in the case of Ignatius, it appeared very early indeed in the second century.

B. Supersessionism and Engraftment in the Gospel of John

Is it true, as *A Theological Understanding* claims, that supersessionism is a second-century construction, only then and wrongly based on passages in the New Testament? Among the last first-century Christian writings is the Gospel of John, written during the last decade of the century, perhaps in Ephesus.²⁴

Antipathy to Judaism is found throughout the Gospel of John. A recurring theme is the hostility of "the Jews" to Jesus and to the early Christian movement. Jews are unbelievers (3:25, 6:41-52, 10:19-21, 11:37, 12:37). Jews persecute Jesus and those who believe in him (7:13, 10:31). John frequently combines these themes: Jews both disbelieve and persecute those who do believe (5:10-18, 8:48-57, 9:18-23). Raymond Brown has written that the author's attitude toward "the Jews" encompasses all Jews collectively and that it cannot be reduced to some smaller Jewish group such as the "Jewish authorities" or the "Judeans."²⁵ Brown believes that the author's antipathy to the Jews may have arisen from many factors, including the presence of Samaritans among the early Johannine community, the role that some of the Jewish religious authorities played in the death of Jesus, and the expulsion of Christians from some synagogues toward the end of the century.²⁶

John believed that the Jews of the late first century could no longer claim

²³*A Theological Understanding*, p. 8.

²⁴Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), p. 246; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (I-XII)* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), pp. lxxxvi, ciii-civ.

²⁵Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 41. See also Samuel Sandmel's remarks in the supplementary volume of the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), p. 478.

²⁶Brown, *Community*, pp. 40-43. The expulsion of Christians from synagogues did not occur everywhere, nor, where it occurred, did it take place all at once (see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the*

to be the children of Abraham. The author has Jesus say to those claiming Abrahamic descent (8:33, 37), "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did . . . You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires" (8:39b, 44a; the *New Revised Standard Version* is used in this article). John thus echoes Paul's principle that physical descent from Abraham does not place an unbeliever among Abraham's spiritual offspring (Rom. 9:6-8; Gal. 3:6-9, 4:21-31). To use the language of the Presbyterian document, the Jews of John's time were no longer within the covenant. There is no explicit theory of supersessionism in John, no explanation of how it is that Christians have replaced Jews in the covenant, but there is little doubt that the author of the Gospel believed this to be the case. Like Ignatius, John had no idea of engraftment. He did not so much argue for supersession as assume it: Salvation is "from the Jews" (4:22), but the Jews have disbelieved and so have placed themselves away from God.

C. Supersessionism and Engraftment in the Gospel of Matthew

Some two decades before the completion of John's Gospel, Matthew was written, probably in the city of Antioch.²⁷ The Jewish-Christian issues underlying the Gospel of Matthew were different from those that stood behind John and Ignatius. The institutional breach between Christianity and Judaism that had begun to occur by the end of the first century had not yet taken place. Unlike the situation reflected in John, the Christians had not yet been expelled from the synagogue; unlike the situation reflected in Ignatius's letters, discussions between Christians and Jews were still taking place.

The Romans had destroyed Jerusalem in 70 C.E., about a decade before Matthew was written, and, as a result, the temple-based center of Jewish faith and practice could no longer be maintained. The worship of God by the offering of sacrifices had, of necessity, ceased.²⁸ In this radically new situation, the Christians and the Pharisees were each claiming to be the rightful heirs to the religion of the Hebrew Bible, which, since the temple had been destroyed, could no longer be practiced. Shaye J. D. Cohen has written, "After the destruction of the temple, which must have been felt keenly in all reaches of the population, what could have been more natural than to take the extra-temple piety that had developed in the preceding centuries and view it as the

Maccabees to the Mishnah [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987], pp. 227-228). Where expulsion did occur, however, the Christian community remembered it bitterly (Jn. 9:22, 12:42, 16:2).

²⁷A consensus of contemporary scholars has agreed that Matthew was written in Antioch, probably during the eighth or ninth decade of the first century. See Kümmel, *Introduction*, p. 119, and, most recently, John P. Meier's discussion in Raymond E. Brown and John P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), pp. 15-27.

²⁸For the importance of the temple and the impact of its destruction upon post-biblical Judaism, see Jacob Neusner, *From Testament to Torah* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1988), pp. 15-24.

equivalent or replacement for the temple cult?"²⁹ The Christians believed that Jesus was the fulfillment of the scriptures; the Pharisees believed instead in piety and acts of loving-kindness.³⁰

Matthew was thus written in a time of increasing competition and conflict between the Christians and the Pharisees, and criticisms of the latter may be found throughout this Gospel. The Pharisees are portrayed as the opponents of Jesus. They seek to impose human traditions on Jesus and on others (12:1-2, 9-12; 15:1-2). Because Jesus opposes their teachings, they plot against him (12:14). They seek to trap Jesus by asking for a sign from him (16:1) or by embroiling him in controversial questions (19:3, 22:15-16, 22:34-36). Matthew's Pharisees are hypocrites who do not practice what they teach (23:3-4). Their prayers are said for public recognition and not from piety (23:5-7). They obey minor matters of the law but omit the weightier matters of justice, mercy, and faith (23:23).³¹

There is clearly a claim of supersession behind Matthew's treatment of the Pharisees. Matthew's Jewish Christians believed that they, not the Pharisees, were the true successors to the religion of the Hebrew Bible. Since the claims of each were exclusive, they necessarily had to deny that status to the Pharisees: The Pharisees and their converts are not children of Abraham but "child[ren] of hell" (23:15).³² It is important to note that, unlike the antipathy between John's Gospel and the Jews, the conflict between Matthew's Pharisees and Christians occurs from a position within Judaism. Like the Essenes who also denounced Jews outside their own movement,

²⁹Cohen, *From the Maccabees*, p. 218.

³⁰Matthew's use of Hos. 6:6 is especially interesting in this connection. The Pharisee Johanan ben Zakkai had quoted Hos. 6:6 in support of the Pharisaic doctrine that acts of loving-kindness replaced sacrifice in making atonement after the temple had been destroyed: "Be not grieved. We have another atonement as effective as this. And what is it? It is acts of loving kindness, as it is said, *For I desire mercy, not sacrifice*" (Judah Goldin, tr., *The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955], p. 34). The only citations of that verse in the New Testament occur in Mt. 9:13 and 12:7, in which Jesus quotes it against the Pharisees. In Matthew's view it is the Christians, not the Pharisees, who know what "mercy, and not sacrifice" means.

³¹Matthew's denunciations of the Pharisees includes Q material found also in Luke, but Matthew intensifies his source's condemnations, undoubtedly reflecting the intensity of the conflicts of the time. Mt. 23:2-3, which speaks of the Pharisees as those who "sit on Moses' seat," does not contradict Matthew's general attitude toward Pharisaism. The Pharisees were gaining control over Palestinian Judaism in the time of Matthew, and the passage acknowledges that historical reality. The statement in 23:3 that the Pharisees' teachings are to be obeyed may reflect the position of a conservative minority in Matthew's church, which still hoped for reconciliation with the synagogue (so, Meier, in *Antioch and Rome*, p. 49; see also Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978], p. 18). As our discussion of the Gospel of John indicates, however, such hopes were soon to be undercut by developments in both Judaism and Christianity.

³²Jacob Neusner has noted, "Surely the competition between the Pharisees and the Christian missionaries for the loyalty of the mass of Jews lies at the foundation of these sayings" (*From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973], p. 77). The Pharisees' attitude toward the Christians during the same period may have been equally hostile. Sandmel wrote, "It is probable that hostility toward Christians surfaced in some Jewish literature just as hostility toward the Jews is apparent in the NT and the following" (*IDB*[S], p. 478).

Matthew's Jewish Christians believed that they, not their opponents, were the legitimate heirs to the Abrahamic covenant. Unlike John and Ignatius, Matthew attacked his opponents from a fundamentally Jewish position: The Pharisees are criticized not for being Jews but for being bad Jews; in Matthew's view, they do not follow the scriptures to which he and they both claim to be committed. There is no idea of engraftment in Matthew's Gospel. As a Jewish Christian, Matthew would have denied any suggestion that he and his community were once outside the covenant.³³

D. Supersessionism and Engraftment in the Theology of Paul

We have seen that a sort of supersessionism existed among Christians during the last quarter of the first century. For Matthew it was the Pharisees who were outside the covenant; for John, all the Jews. How did the matter stand for Paul? Is the Presbyterian document correct in finding engraftment, not supersession, to be the earliest Christian understanding of the relationship of Christians to Jews?

Paul believed firmly that the Christian church was the successor to Israel and the inheritor of the Abrahamic promises. Christians are "spiritual" Jews (Rom. 2:29), Abraham's offspring (Gal. 3:16, 4:16), the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16), the true circumcision (Phil. 3:3). Especially in the theological controversies in which he was embroiled, Paul wanted to insist that gentile believers were not inferior to Jews who also believed in Jesus: The titles and attributes of the people of God applied fully to gentile Christians as well.

However, the application of these terms to the church leaves unanswered the question of what Paul believed concerning the relationship of gentile Christians to Jews who believe in God and seek to obey God but do not believe in Jesus.³⁴ The key passages in this regard are found in Rom. 9 and Gal. 3-4. Paul distinguished between those who are Abraham's physical offspring and those who are his spiritual heirs: "For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants; . . . This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants" (Rom. 9:6b-7a, 8). In Gal. 3, a more detailed presentation of the same principle appears. The true Heir is Jesus Christ, in whom the Abrahamic promises are fulfilled, and those who have put on Christ become *in him* the "heirs according to promise" (3:29; also see 3:16). Paul's allegory in Gal. 4 illustrates the point further: Those who believe in Jesus are "children of the promise" (4:28); those who are physically

³³Raymond Brown noted that each of the major Christian movements in the first decades of Christianity consisted of Jewish Christians and their gentile converts (*Antioch and Rome*, especially pp. 3-4). Individual gentiles who joined Matthew's community might have described their experience as one of engraftment, but the community as a whole would not have done so.

³⁴The definitions of the Presbyterian document notwithstanding, it is doubtful whether anyone in the first century would have found a place in the covenant for persons of Jewish descent who "do not practice Judaism at all" (*A Theological Understanding*, p. 5).

descended from Abraham but who do not believe are not the inheritors of the promise but the children of slavery (4:30). Paul's principle is one of supersessionism, but a carefully defined supersessionism. Christians have not *superseded* Israel in the covenant; in Jesus Christ Christians *are* Israel, while those who claim descent from Israel but do not have the faith of the new Israel are not.³⁵

It is in this setting that the engraftment passage of Rom. 11 is to be understood. The Presbyterian document and its study guide cite this more than any other biblical passage, and it is primarily from Rom. 11 that the authors derive the document's affirmation that Christians have not replaced Jews in the latter's covenant with God.³⁶ Verses 17-18 are especially important to the authors, who conclude: "The church, being made up primarily of those who were once aliens and strangers to the covenant of promise, has been engrafted into the people of God by the covenant with Abraham."³⁷ Their emphasis is on the church's engraftment, and little is said about those who, according to 11:17, have been broken off. Post-biblical Judaism is equated with biblical Israel in the document's citation of Rom. 11:2: "'God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew' . . . The church has not 'replaced' the Jewish people."³⁸ As we have already seen, however, Paul could not believe that physical descent from Abraham guaranteed Jews a place in the Abrahamic covenant. Instead, he repeatedly employed the Hebrew Bible's idea of the remnant, the faithful few who believe while most others fail to see (Rom. 11:5, 10).

As the Presbyterian authors recognized, the olive tree into which gentiles are engrafted is Israel.³⁹ Already in Isaiah, however, the image of the olive tree had been used in connection with the remnant: "On that day the glory of Jacob will be brought low . . . Gleanings will be left in it, as when an olive tree is beaten — two or three berries in the top of the highest bough" (Is. 17:4a, 6a). The image of the olive tree as the remnant of Israel was, no doubt, in Paul's mind as he cited Is. 10:22 in reference to post-biblical Jews: "Though the number of the children of Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved" (Rom. 9:27). Paul agonized over the unbelief of his fellow Jews and believed that their unbelief had cut them off from participation in the covenant.⁴⁰ The remnant who believe will be saved, Paul believed,

³⁵Did Paul believe that Jews are hated by God on account of their disbelief, thereby justifying the "teaching of contempt" that the Presbyterian document condemns on p. 13? No: if Jews *qua* Jews have no special relationship with God, then as human beings they remain beloved. The same point applies, of course, not only to Jews but also to Presbyterians.

³⁶*A Theological Understanding*, p. 8.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 9.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹*Ibid.*; see p. 29.

⁴⁰Paul's position thus resembles that which E. P. Sanders found in first-century Judaism in general, which he has labeled "covenantal nomism": An individual's standing within the covenant is due to God's gracious election, but by disobedience one may place oneself on the outside (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977], especially pp. 418-428). "Simple

and he looked forward to a day when, through their belief, the Jews would be included again (Rom. 11:12, 24). In the meantime, the descendants of Abraham into which Christians have been engrafted are not all Jews *per se* but only that remnant who believe.

III. Evaluating the Presbyterian Document

A. The Document and the Bible

Some twenty biblical passages are cited or quoted in the text of *A Theological Understanding* or in the accompanying study guide. Several of these passages are cited only once (e.g., Ex. 33:19 on p. 29); some are suggested readings for the opening of a study session (e.g., Ps. 15 on p. 25); and others are used to illustrate theological points that are not central to the document's points (e.g., Acts 5:38b-39 on p. 32). The document offers little exegetical support for its interpretation of the passages it cites. One example is the paper's treatment of Gen. 12:1-3 and Acts 13:47. The Genesis passage is the familiar account of God's calling Abraham from his land and promising to make his name great and to make him a blessing to all nations. The passage is cited on p. 10 of the document in support of the statement, "It is for the sake of God's redemption of the world that Israel was elected." The Genesis passage is set alongside Acts 13:47, in which a similar Hebrew Bible passage is applied to the church. The juxtaposition of these passages is used to support the document's third affirmation, which states that both the church and the Jews are elected by God for witness to the world. The explication elaborates: "God continues that purpose through Christians and Jews. The church, like the Jews, is called to be a light to the nations."⁴¹ The interpretation placed on these passages by the authors of *A Theological Understanding* is clear: Genesis speaks of God's eternal election of Israel and of the Jews, and Acts speaks of God's election of the church.

However, is Acts 13:47 intended to say something about the church as a whole or something about the special mission of Paul and Barnabas? The passage that Acts 13:47 quotes is Is. 49:6b, which speaks of God's special commission to the prophet: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." By placing this quotation in the mouths of Paul and Barnabas, the author of Acts placed the mantle of Isaiah upon them, thus emphasizing their special mission in the early expansion of Christianity.⁴² (Paul used the same technique to make a similar point in Gal. 1:15, in which he alluded to Is. 49:1 with reference to himself.) It is thus not

heredity did not ensure salvation. That came to all individual Israelites who were faithful" (ibid., pp. 237-238).

⁴¹*A Theological Understanding*, p. 10.

⁴²So, Robert L. Brawley, who wrote of Acts 13:47, "Here Luke links the motif of a 'light to the Gentiles' . . . to Paul and Barnabas and establishes the end of the earth . . . as the goal of their

clear that Acts 13:47 is intended to describe the relationship of Christianity as a whole to the covenant with Abraham.⁴³ The Presbyterian document, however, interprets the passage in this way with no apparent recognition that a different understanding might be possible.

The ways of using the Bible that are found in this document are not what is to be expected from Presbyterians. The Presbyterian Church has always advocated biblical literacy on the part of its people, and ministerial candidates learn the skills of interpreting biblical texts in their original languages. Therefore, it is puzzling that, in a document intended to promote theological reflection by members and ministers of the denomination, there are few explanations of why the authors have understood biblical texts in the way they have. Acknowledging that “the scriptural and theological bases for this view are clear enough,” the authors seem primarily to oppose supersessionism not on the basis of their reading of New Testament texts but because of the uses to which this concept has been put by Christian Antisemites. “The long and dolorous history of Christian imperialism, in which the church often justified anti-Jewish acts and attitudes in the name of Jesus, finds its theological base in this teaching.” No doubt, as the authors state, their theological propositions have emerged from conscientious wrestling with matters of contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue,⁴⁴ but they are unlikely to persuade Christians for whom the Bible, not contemporary experience, is the primary resource for doing theology.

B. The Document and the Study Guide

The reader might seek to infer the basis for the document’s exegesis from the comments in the study guide. Often, however, the guide’s helps are in the form of questions to the readers and do not state why the suggested interpretation is to be preferred over an alternative. Odd uses of biblical passages abound. In one such instance, Gamaliel’s counsel, “if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail” (Acts 5:38), is elevated to a principle for the theology of history: “If we believe that God acts in history, what does the

mission—a verbatim parallel to the last phrase of Acts 1:8” (*Luke-Acts and the Jews* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987], p. 30; see also p. 72).

⁴³What if this argument is wrong and Acts 13:47 was intended to speak about the relationship of the whole church to the covenant with Abraham, as the Presbyterian document understands the verse? The immediate context of the Acts passage is one that suggests replacement, not engraftment. In Acts 13:44-47 Paul and Barnabas have been rejected by the Jews in Antioch of Pisidia. In 13:46 Paul and Barnabas address the Antiochene Jews: “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles.” If 13:47 is to be understood as a programmatic statement that the whole church (and not just Paul and Barnabas) are included in the Abrahamic commission, then 13:46 must also be universalized and thus must entail the rejection not only of the leaders of the Jewish community in Antioch of Pisidia but of all other Jews as well. This is a conclusion that the authors of the Presbyterian document clearly do not wish to reach. Fortunately, neither does this seem to be what Luke intended to say.

⁴⁴*A Theological Understanding*, p. 3.

continuing existence of people of religions other than ours imply?"⁴⁵ One might as well ask what the existence for hundreds of years of people who believed in slavery implies: God's love for people despite their errors is not convertible into a principle that the errors themselves have God's approval.⁴⁶

A puzzling discrepancy between the document and its study guide occurs in the interpretation of the figure of the olive tree in Rom. 11:17-24. The text of the document follows Jer. 11:16 and similar passages in identifying the olive tree as Israel.⁴⁷ The study guide, however, seems to propose a different interpretation by asking: "Who or what is the 'olive tree'? Is that Israel or the love of God? . . . In what sense are both Christians and Jews not rooted in Israel but in God?"⁴⁸ There is, of course, a sense in which this is true, but that is not what Rom. 11 intended to say. Especially in the study guide, biblical texts seem to be cited more as illustrations of theological conclusions that one might adopt than as evidence for adopting these positions in the first place.

It is perhaps best to recall that the study guide was not adopted by the church's General Assembly. Since, as we have seen, it seems less well-thought-out than, and sometimes advocates an interpretation different from, that of the document, it is perhaps best read as an individual interpretation of the document rather than as an official commentary. It is not clear that the authors of the document would have approved all the interpretations of the document or of the Bible that the study guide presents.

C. Supersessionism and Jewish-Christian Dialogue

As we have seen, one of the document's central claims is simply wrong. Far from its being the case that supersessionism is a second-century aberration, we have traced the idea that believing Christians have replaced unbelieving Jews in the covenant from the second century back to the writings of Paul. Finally, we have seen that the idea of engraftment, to which the Presbyterian document is greatly attached, does not justify the theological conclusion that Christians have been joined into an ongoing relationship that God has with all Jews; according to the New Testament, that into which the church has been engrafted is not Judaism but the remnant who believe in Jesus Christ.

A Theological Understanding is motivated by concerns emerging out of the experience of Presbyterians and others in Jewish-Christian dialogue. To be sure, Christian beliefs about the church's special relationship to God have historically been used by Christians as a basis for antisemitic attitudes and acts.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 32.

⁴⁶In view of the fact that by the time Acts was written Christianity had survived for five decades, one may wonder whether Luke intended Gamaliel's statement as a more broadly applicable theological principle. Brawley noted that Gamaliel's words would have had a special significance after the failure of the Jews' revolt against Rome (*Luke-Acts and the Jews*, pp. 88-90; cf. Acts 4:35-37), but there is no indication that the author intended this statement to be a general principle for the theological understanding of history.

⁴⁷*A Theological Understanding*, p. 9.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 29.

However, a revisionist writing of early Christian history and theology, according to which the church at its beginning never held the ideas that later became troublesome, is hardly the way forward. A better way of dealing with the New Testament material is pointed out by Raymond Brown, who wrote in his own study of Johannine Christianity: "It would be incredible for a twentieth-century Christian to share or to justify the Johannine contention that 'the Jews' are the children of the devil, an affirmation which is placed on the lips of Jesus (8:44); but I cannot see how it helps contemporary Jewish-Christian relationships to disguise the fact that such an attitude once existed."⁴⁹ The intensity of the early Christians' attitude toward Judaism and the Jews was, as Brown pointed out, no doubt a product of the intensity of the conflicts of the time. Christians are not permitted to think of the Jews of the first or the twentieth century as hypocritical (Mt. 23:3) or as "dogs" (Phil. 3:2).

Nor can we fall into the trap of the genetic fallacy, which assumes that if we know the original setting of an idea we can explain it away. The church's understanding of its relationship with God may have come to be expressed in the language of first-century conflicts, but it is not itself a product of those conflicts. As Paul's development of the doctrine demonstrates, it is rooted in the Hebrew Bible concept of the faithful remnant (Rom. 9:27) and in the Christian conviction what the whole of the scriptures reach their fulfillment in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16).⁵⁰ The Christian belief about the theological status of Judaism is necessarily related to Christianity's belief in Jesus Christ. If Jesus is merely one teacher among many, then those who do not hear him may not have missed anything vital. However, if Jesus is indeed the promised one, the "Messiah and Lord, God's anointed who has inaugurated the kingdom of peace and righteousness through his life, death, and resurrection,"⁵¹ then a system of interpreting the Hebrew Bible that does not understand Jesus to be its fulfillment cannot be right. The Presbyterian document, motivated by a concern not to offend Jews unnecessarily by an insensitive presentation of the Christian faith, seems reluctant to affirm this conclusion.

D. The Contributions of the Document

There are important contributions made by *A Theological Understanding*. As we have seen, it was one thing for the Jewish Christian Matthew to criticize the Pharisees' interpretation of the Jewish tradition, just as it was for Paul the Jew to lament the failure of his fellow Jews to believe and to condemn the observance of Jewish practices by gentile converts. It is quite another when a contemporary Christian who knows the words of Matthew and Paul but does

⁴⁹Brown, *Community*, pp. 41-42.

⁵⁰For the nature of the early Christian belief that the scriptures are fulfilled in Jesus, see C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (Digswell Place, Hertfordshire: James Nisbet, 1952). Dodd believed this conviction originated with Jesus himself, who pointed out those passages that he believed his mission fulfilled (p. 10).

⁵¹*A Theological Understanding*, p. 7.

not know Judaism comes to understand the latter solely in terms of the language in which the conflicts of the first century were expressed. It is in this connection that, despite its exegetical and historical difficulties, the Presbyterian document has an important message for Christians. The fifth affirmation, repudiating the use of Christian doctrines in support of anti-Jewish attitudes and actions, is a regrettable necessity in view of the centuries – and especially the last century – of the shared history of Christians and Jews. The explication warns:

The public reading of Scripture without explicating potentially misleading passages about “the Jews,” preaching which uses Judaism as a negative example in order to commend Christianity, public prayer which assumes that only the prayers of Christians are pleasing to God, teaching in the church school which reiterates stereotypes and non-historical ideas about the Pharisees and Jewish leadership—all of these contribute, however subtly, to a continuation of the church’s “teaching of contempt.”⁵²

Other important sections of the document include the final paragraph of the explication of the fourth affirmation, which provides a strong statement about the nature of Jewish-Christian dialogue,⁵³ and the sixth affirmation and its explication, which attempt to offer a basis for a balanced ethical and theological understanding of issues in the Middle East.⁵⁴

In the final analysis, the strengths and weaknesses of the Presbyterian document are summarized in its statement, “We must be sensitive as we speak the truth we know, lest we add to the suffering of others or increase hostility and misunderstanding by what we say.”⁵⁵ It is also true, however, that Christians must “speak the truth we know” and not something less than that truth, as though dialogue and disagreement cannot coexist. *A Theological Understanding* exemplifies sensitivity; regrettably, the document’s commitment to a sound understanding of the beliefs of the first Christians is less well-attested. The document seems to portray the faith of the New Testament and of the church not according to what they have taught but according to what they

⁵²Ibid., p. 13.

⁵³Ibid., p. 12.

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 13-15. The sixth affirmation states: “We affirm the continuity of God’s promise of land along with the obligations of that promise to the people Israel” (p. 13). The explication of this affirmation understands “land” to mean “more than place or property; land is a biblical metaphor for sustainable life, prosperity, peace, and security” (p. 15). The document firmly states, “We affirm the rights to these essentials to the Jewish people.” However, in light of the biblical principle that those with “land” have obligations to “strangers in their gates,” the document also affirms “those same rights in the name of justice to all peoples” (pp. 14-15). The document reaffirms actions of previous Presbyterian General Assemblies that affirmed the right of both Israel and the Palestinians to self-determination, civil liberties, and statehood (p. 2). Its authors are convinced that Jews and Judaism are of ongoing theological importance for the church, but this status does not extend to the present-day State of Israel. In the authors’ view, Israel is a secular state and has no special theological status resulting from its Jewish heritage. The document disavows any attempt by Jewish Zionists or by Christian dispensationalists to validate the State of Israel theologically (p. 14).

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 2.

ought to have taught. Ultimately, of course, such an approach harms Jewish-Christian dialogue. To the extent that Jewish readers of the Presbyterian document take its second and third affirmations to represent what Christians actually believe, they will be wrong; to that degree the cause of interreligious understanding will be set back rather than advanced.

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