

What John Calvin Got Wrong About the Restoration of the Kingdom to Israel

The book of Acts records that, after the resurrection of Jesus, He appeared to the apostles “over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3c, NIV). This was in addition to the three-plus years they had spent with Him before His crucifixion, sitting at His feet and drinking in His words. Now it was time for Him to leave this earth, so the apostles asked Him in verse 6, “Lord, are You at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” is seemed like a perfectly legitimate question.

After all, He had been speaking with them for more than 40 days “about the kingdom of God.”

He had already spoken to them about His future coming to Jerusalem (see Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21).

And He even said this to them on one occasion: “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28).

They were now asking Him, “Will this happen now that You’re ascending to heaven? Will all Your promises to Israel and Your purposes for the world be fulfilled in the coming days?”

According to John Calvin, the famed theologian and commentator, they could not have been more wrong.

He wrote, “He showeth that the apostles were gathered together when as this question was moved, that we may know that it came not of the foolishness of one or two that it was moved, but it

was moved by the common consent of them all; but marvelous is their rudeness, that when as they had been diligently instructed by the space of three whole years, they betray no less ignorance than if they had heard never a word. There are as many errors in this question as words."

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That is a strong rebuke, especially in light of the fact that they had just spent 40 days with the resurrected Lord talking about some of these very things. Were they really that far off?

Calvin continued, "They ask Him as concerning a kingdom; but they dream of an earthly kingdom, which should flow with riches, with dainties, with external peace and with such like good things; and while they assign the present time to the restoring of the same. They desire to triumph before the battle; for before such time as they begin to work they will have their wages. They are also greatly deceived herein, in that they restrain Christ's kingdom unto the carnal Israel, which was to be spread abroad, even unto the uttermost parts of the world."

Their error, then, according to Calvin, was failing to see that Christ's kingdom would extend far beyond the borders of Israel. This, of course, was true, but it was part of the Messianic vision in Jewish teaching as well, namely, that with the coming of the Messiah to Israel, redemption would come to the nations (see Isa. 2:1-4 for one example).

Calvin also claims that they misunderstood the timing of God's plan, which was certainly a fair criticism. Yet it is a mistake of which many prophets throughout the ages have been guilty (see 1 Pet. 1:10-12).

In no way did the apostles deserve Calvin's stern rebuke,

namely, "They declared thereby what bad scholars they were under so good a master."

That's why Jesus didn't rebuke their question, as if it were fundamentally flawed. He simply told them that this was not to be their focus at that time: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by His own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:7-8).

In other words, that's a great question, but that's for the Father to know. You concentrate on bearing witness to the Messiah's death and resurrection, starting in Jerusalem and going to the ends of the world.

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As noted by the late Messianic Jewish scholar David Stern in his "Jewish New Testament Commentary," "Yeshua's answer to His disciples' question as to whether He will now restore self-rule to Israel is, '*You don't need to know the dates or the times; the Father has kept these under His own authority.*' [emphasis added] From this we learn, contrary to the teaching of Replacement Theology, that the kingdom certainly *will* be restored to Israel. The only question is when, and that is not presently ours to know. 'The secret things belong to *Adonai* [the Lord] our God' (Deut. 29:28(29))."

As to the term "replacement theology," Stern commented:

There is an ancient, widespread and pernicious Christian teaching that the Church is the "New" or "Spiritual" Israel, having replaced the Jews as God's people. In this view—known variously as Replacement theology, Covenant theology, Kingdom Now theology, Dominionism, Reconstructionism and (in England) Restorationism—God's promises to Israel were nullified when "the Jews" refused to accept Jesus (never mind that all the first believers were Jews). This false theology, impugning

the character of God by suggesting that he will welch on his promises, has provided apparent justification for many antisemitic acts in the Church. It also lies behind most Christian protestations that the present-day regathering of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel is without theological or biblical significance.

More recently, terms like “fulfillment theology” or “expansion theology” have been used, with many Christian leaders finding the term “replacement theology” to be both misleading (in terms of their own beliefs) and negative (in light of historic Christian antisemitism).

Either way, however, the end result is the same: Promises that were previously given to national Israel no longer apply to the Jewish people. We are told, instead, that they have been fulfilled in Christ or expanded to include all believers.

And while there are beautiful, Jesus-exalting truths intermingled within various forms of replacement theology, the end result of all these theological expressions is the same.

Consequently, it is no surprise that the Christians today who tend to be the most critical of the state of Israel are those who hold to one form or another of replacement theology. Conversely, it is those Christians who recognize that the same God who scattered Israel is also in the process of regathering to the land His ancient people who recognize the degree to which Satan himself is trying to wipe them out.

We can preach Jesus as the only way to salvation for Jew and Gentile alike (as I do).

We can emphasize that, in Jesus, we are all equals, without class system or caste system (this is true).

And we can call for justice and equity for both the Israelis and their Palestinian neighbors (as we should).

But let us not do it at the expense of God's covenantal promises to Israel.

As Paul wrote, "As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and His call are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:28–29).

Let all of God's people say, "Amen!" {eoa}

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