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The Institute Volume 10, Autumn 2000

The Grammar of the Christian Story

by R. Kendall Soulen

Over the past year I discussed the issues raised in my book, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, with many scores of pastors, thanks to the remarkable work of the ICJS and its superb staff. I learned a great deal from these conversations, and I'm grateful to all who participated.

My favorite part of meeting with the study groups was not dwelling on supersessionism. Rather, it was reasoning about the *grammar* of the Christian story. As I understand it, Christians are entrusted with telling the biblical story and reflecting on its grammar for the sake of making faithful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. I regard supersessionism as a bit of *bad grammar* that has ingrained itself in the church's narrative imagination and that secretly undermines its proclamation. Unfortunately, bad grammar cannot be cut out all at once. It must be gradually replaced by other bits of grammar that are more transparent to the gospel and the glory of God.

During my time with the study groups, I would say that I wanted to commend two key bits of theological grammar. First, Christians should recover the biblical habit of seeing the world as peopled, not by Christians and Jews, but by *Jews and gentiles*, by *Israel* and the *nations*. I am convinced that one reason Christians have a difficult time "inhabiting" the biblical world is that this important biblical distinction has become strange to them. Christians (who are mostly gentiles) tend to think of the distinction as outmoded, un-Christian, and even dangerous. In other words, they think of the distinction as superseded. In contrast, the Bible, including the Apostolic Witness, presents the distinction as an enduring mark of the one human family, still visible in the church and even in the consummated reign of God.

The second related grammatical rule I wanted to commend is this. Christians should treat the distinction between Israel and the nations as a good gift of God that belongs to God's *consummating* purpose for creation. Though the distinction can be lived out in fallen ways that stand in need of

redemption, the distinction itself is neither evil nor merely an antidote to evil that we eventually outgrow. Instead, the distinction testifies that God -- by his election of the Jewish people -- has entered into an economy of mutual blessing with the human family that also places the human family in an economy of mutual blessing with one another, as Jew and as gentile. The church does not replace the Jewish people, nor does it erase the distinction between gentile and Jew. Instead, it embodies a promissory way of being Jew and gentile together that -- according to Christian understanding -- is a foretaste of the reign of God.

A telling of the Christian story that incorporates these two bits of grammar will resemble traditional versions of the Christian story in many ways. Certainly, most Jews will continue to find this version of the Christian story foreign and even in some respects disturbing. Nevertheless, such a telling makes room for both the universality of the gospel and the irrevocability of God's election of the Jewish people, and therefore does a better job of accounting for the biblical data than do supersessionistic alternatives. For that reason, it is, I hope, more transparent to the gospel and to the glory of God.

Having said that, my work with the ICJS study groups made me more aware of areas where I (and perhaps others, too) need to do more thinking.

Some participants, for example, agreed that Christians should reject supersessionism but found my proposed solution too traditional to be much help. They liked the suggestion that the Bible's central "plot" concerns economies of mutual blessing, between God and creation and between creatures and one another. But they wanted to develop this line of thought further to include a broader range of religious communities. Don't I privilege the church and the Jewish people over other religious communities? Shouldn't the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism, for example, also be an instance of mutual blessing? In general, this perspective sought to bring claims for both the gospel and the election of the Jewish people under the umbrella of a more broadly pluralistic understanding of God's dealings with human creation. While I do not think theological pluralism is a viable option for Christian theology, this line of questioning does pose an important question: What is the status of other religious communities from the perspective of a "post-supersessionistic" Christian theology? Here is an area where I want to do more thinking.

Other participants were concerned that my telling of the Christian story tended to obscure the "decisiveness" that Christians have traditionally wanted to ascribe to Jesus Christ within the economy of salvation. Initially, this criticism surprised me, since I thought that I emphasized this theme more strongly than some earlier Christian critics of supersessionism (such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Paul

van Buren). Unlike these two authors, I do not believe that strong claims for the universal decisiveness of Jesus Christ are necessarily supersessionistic. I think such claims become supersessionistic when Christians cease to understand the decisiveness of Jesus Christ in light of the coming reign of God on the one hand, and in light of God's continuing fidelity to the covenant with Israel on the other. However, I think it is probably true that this theme is still a bit muted in my book. Here is another area for further reflection. Christians need to do more work to show that the church's classical trinitarian and christological affirmations do not merely permit a grudging acknowledgement of Israel's irrevocable election, but require a ringing affirmation of this indispensable biblical truth.

See a [response](#) to this article by The Rev. Thomas E. Breidenthal.

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The Institute for Christian & Jewish Studies
1316 Park Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21217
410.523.7227 / fax: 410.523.0636
email: Info@icjs.org
