

Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology – November 16, 2018
The Agenda for Post-Supersessionist Theology in Relation to Jewish Disciples of Jesus
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In these remarks I will reflect on the agenda for post-supersessionist theology from my own perspective as a Messianic Jewish theologian. I begin by highlighting two sentences from the purpose statement of our new society: “*The Society welcomes participation from all who seek to advance post-supersessionist theology. It especially seeks to promote perspectives that remain faithful to core Christological convictions; [and] that affirm the ecclesia’s identity as a table fellowship of Jews and Gentiles united in the Messiah...*”

Many earlier analyses of Christian anti-Judaism contended that supersessionism was logically entailed by the ecclesia’s “core Christological convictions,” with their universal soteriological implications. Consequently, it seemed that the former could be eliminated only by attenuating the latter.

Similarly, supersessionism was associated with the view that the ecclesia should be a place for Jews as well as gentiles. The tragic history of Christian anti-Judaism and coercive missionary activity among the Jewish people lent credibility to this second contention. But this critique went beyond opposition to Christian anti-Judaism and to institutionalized missionary efforts to “convert” Jews. Motivated by a sincerely penitent regard for Jewish sensibilities, these Christian opponents of supersessionism accepted the judgment of Jewish authorities that Jews who enter the ecclesia forfeit any legitimate claim to Jewish identity. As a result, the ecclesia could not call itself a community of Jews and gentiles, for Jews who entered its ranks ceased to be Jews as a consequence of that entry. (Ironically, adopting this position brought these Christian allies of the Jewish people into agreement with the Christian tradition of anti-Judaism, which, while encouraging Jews to be baptized, denied them the right to Jewish identity and self-expression after departing from the baptismal font. The denial of Jewish identity to baptized Jews was a significant point of historical agreement between the two rival religious communities.)

I respect the motives of these critics of supersessionism, and appreciate the logic of their position. The only question is whether the ecclesia may compromise its “core Christological convictions” or nullify its claim to be a community of “Jews and gentiles” without undermining its own fundamental calling and identity. For those like myself who conclude that this is not possible, the challenge is to think through these two affirmations in a way that is not only compatible with post-supersessionist theology, but actually enables the project to advance. If this challenge is not undertaken, then the majority of the worldwide ecclesia must be surrendered to supersessionism.

Our new scholarly society does not treat these two characteristics—“core Christological convictions” and “the ecclesia’s identity as a table fellowship of Jews and Gentiles united in the Messiah”—as essential marks of all post-supersessionist theology. We acknowledge the contributions of pioneers from an earlier generation, and their theological descendants today, who promote non-supersessionist positions without these two characteristics. The society does, however, “especially seek to promote” those varieties of post-supersessionist thought which embrace these two related views.

I would now like to reflect on the second of these characteristics in order to clarify the meaning of the society's purpose statement as I understand it. The need for such clarification became evident to me through the response of a prominent Christian scholar involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue. He interpreted the clause as a condensed formula expressing my own particular (and he would probably add "peculiar") ecclesiology, known as "bilateral ecclesiology." That was not unreasonable, given my role as one of the founders of the society. But it is not in fact the case.

What, then, does it mean to "*affirm the ecclesia's identity as a table fellowship of Jews and Gentiles united in the Messiah?*"

To answer that question, I find it helpful to distinguish three different ecclesiological positions which are all consistent with this clause. First, there is the bilateral ecclesiology of *Post-missionary Messianic Judaism*, in which Jewish believers in Jesus are ideally members of distinct Jewish congregational units peopled largely by other Jews, and in which Torah observance is encouraged and rabbinic tradition is honored. Second, there are other forms of Messianic Jewish ecclesiology, in which Jewish believers in Jesus are ideally members of distinct Jewish congregational units, but in which Torah observance is not encouraged or rabbinic tradition is not honored. Third, there are forms of Jewish Christian ecclesiology which preceded the Messianic Jewish movement and still exist today, in which Jewish believers in Jesus are ideally members of Christian congregational units yet acknowledge the enduring theological significance of their own Jewish identity and seek to express that identity in their daily lives (with or without reference to the Torah or rabbinic tradition)

The second and third ecclesiological positions differ from the vision of bilateral ecclesiology articulated in *Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism*, but would each be in accord with the purpose statement of our new society. (I might add that these three approaches could be rendered compatible with one another by removing the word "ideally" from each of the statements, and accounting for the differences among them by reference to circumstantial and vocational diversity rather than theological necessity.)

I think it noteworthy that the strongest and clearest formulation of the intent of this clause of our society's purpose statement is found in the 2015 document produced by the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews: "*It is and remains a qualitative definition of the Church of the New Covenant that it consists of Jews and Gentiles, even if the quantitative proportions of Jewish and Gentile Christians may initially give a different impression*" (paragraph 43). The appearance of this sentence in an official Catholic Church document should be sufficient to demonstrate that such thinking is not limited to advocates of "bilateral ecclesiology."

The presence of Jewish believers in Jesus in this society does not mean that the society endorses any particular theological interpretation of Jewish ecclesial existence; nor, as already stated, does it mean that the society excludes or delegitimizes forms of post-supersessionist thought which see no theological significance in such Jewish ecclesial identity. It does mean that this society welcomes the participation of such Jews, and seeks to benefit from their contribution.

To be fruitful in a post-supersessionist context, the “core Christological convictions” of the ecclesia must be reconfigured in a way that takes seriously the Jewish identity of Jesus and *his* enduring bond with the Jewish people. Similarly, to be truly post-supersessionist the ecclesiological vision of a community of Jews and gentiles united in the Messiah must take seriously the Jewish identity of these Jews and *their* enduring bond with the Jewish people. That is the task and challenge for a post-supersessionist Christology and ecclesiology which preserves traditional ecclesial treasures while seeking to purify them of their anti-Jewish dross.