

When Culture and Politics Affect(ed) Theology (and Ethics)

Shepherds 360 Conference

Introduction:

Throughout history, there have been several inflection points where church theology was changed by influences from politics and culture. In modern society, pressures to change theology still abound. We must be diligent to avoid these errors, and learning from history is one way we can do this.

Example 1: Bar Kokhba Revolt and Replacement Theology

Context: In 136 AD, Rome destroyed Israel and Jerusalem, and killed, enslaved, or deported most of the Jewish people.

Conflict: Justin Martyr, in *Dialogue with Trypho*, interpreted the destruction of Jerusalem as a sign that God was done with the nation of Israel, and would now work through the Church.

Result: Replacement Theology, the belief that the Church has replaced Israel, and Old Testament prophecies relate to the Church, pervaded for thousands of years, even after the modern reconstitution of the state of Israel.

Example 2: The Sack of Rome and Amillennialism

Context: In 410 AD, the barbarian king of the Goths, Alaric, sacked the city of Rome.

Conflict: Rome had been a Christian empire for nearly a century, and many believed that they were living in the millennial kingdom. The destruction of Rome made many believe the kingdom of God was no more. In wrestling with this, Augustine comes up with the idea of amillennialism in his book *The City of God*.

Result: Amillennialism, the eschatological belief that there is no physical, thousand-year reign Christ, but instead that there is a spiritual kingdom seen through the church, became the prevailing belief for a thousand years, and is still the stance of the Catholic Church today.

Example 3: The joining of Church and State and Pedobaptism

Context: Early in the reformation, Reformer Ulrich Zwingli becomes the city pastor of Zurich Switzerland. He begins to reexamine church doctrine through the lens of *Sola Scriptura*.

Conflict: Because he is employed by the state, rocking the boat too much will cause him to lose his stipend. The baptism of infants is considered an important part of being a Christian nation. Because he cannot do away with the practice of infant baptism, Zwingli develops a system of theology that links baptism with circumcision, and entering the covenant community of God.

Result: Covenant Theology, which is still a major movement among the Reformed Church, begins to be developed and adopted.

Example 4: Andy Stanley and the NT Sexual Ethic

Context: Modern culture demands acceptance of LGBT lifestyles. Recently, Andy Stanley's North Point Community Church hosted an LGBT-affirming event, the "Unconditional Conference."

Conflict: Facing criticism, Stanley defended a "New Testament Sexual Ethic," but said if it doesn't work for you, you can try something different.

Result: By trying to be liked by the world, Stanley and pastors like him abandon the truth of the Bible.