

# **What is the true meaning of religion according to Amos?**



**CHONG HO YU**

# Target audience



- Christians who prioritizes politics over religious truths
- Christians who do not want to challenge their religious leaders and cover up problems
- Christians who have a false sense of security



# Confrontation between Amaziah and Amos



- Amos 7:10-17
- Amaziah accused Amos of conspiring against Israel and Amaziah said that the land was not able to bear Amos's word.
- The reason given by the priest is: **it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.** In Amaziah's value system, political interests (serving the King) are more important than the words of God.

## BGEA's controversy



- During the 2012 Presidential Election, I encountered many Evangelical Christians who support the Republican candidate Mitt Romney.



# BGEA's controversy



- Before the Election, Mitt Romney visited Rev. Billy Graham at his home in Montreat, NC, and got his endorsement. Then, Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) removed Mormonism from the list of heresies and cults from the BGEA's website.



## Defense and criticisms



- The BGEA said it removed the offensive language against Mormonism "because we do not wish to participate in a theological debate about something that has become politicized during this campaign."
- Rev. Samuel Wynn, Superintendent of a United Methodist Church district in Fayetteville, N.C:  
“**What's more important for the kingdom of God: politics or the message of Jesus Christ?**”

## Defense and criticisms



- Pastor Robert Jeffress, First Baptist Church, Dallas, TX:
- “It is unfortunate that the BGEA chose to remove the cult designation describing Mormonism this week. **It will appear to the world that the Graham organization has chosen political expediency over spiritual conviction.** It is possible to endorse Mitt Romney, as I have done, and yet maintain that Mormonism is a false religion that leads people away from the one true God.”

# Defense and criticisms



- Paul Louis Metzger, Professor at Multnomah Biblical Seminary defended for the BGEA: “We should describe rather than label **groups...Jesus never objectified, labeled or wrote anyone off...**He always got beyond stereotypes and moved through doctrinal formulas to engage people graciously and truthfully, to bring the good news home, and to bring people home to be with him in his Father’s house in eternity.”

# What did Jesus say?



- But indeed Jesus labeled people and bluntly criticized religious leaders, just like Amos rebuked the Priest. What did Jesus say about Pharisees and Scribes ?

# Matthew 23



- “1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: 2 “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. 3 So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. 4 They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. 5 “Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries[a] wide and the tassels on their garments long; 6 they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; 7 they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.”

# What did Jesus say?



- Verses 13-33 are about **seven Woes on the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees**
- Jesus labeled Pharisees “**snakes**”: “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”
- Similar texts can be found at Luke 11 and Mark 12.
- **I am not trying to equate Rev. Billy Graham with Amaziah.** But by the standard of Orthodox Christianity, Mormonism is highly questionable. We have to ask ourselves this question: Can we compromise religious truths for political interests?

## Review of what Amaziah did



- Amaziah accused Amos of conspiring against Israel and he said that the land was not able to bear his word. **He tried to cover up the problems by forcing Amos to go away** and prophesize in some other places.
- Even though Amos is not a professional prophet, he dared to challenge the top religious leader. But today some people might lack this type of moral courage.

# Catholic sex abuse scandal

- In 2002 the Catholic sex abuse scandal was exposed. Many priests had sexually abused children as young as 3 years old with the majority aged between 11 and 14.
- Over 3,000 civil lawsuits about sex abuses have been filed against the Catholic Church in the United States.
- Many of the cases span across several decades and are brought forward many years after the abuse occurred.



# Cover-up by church authority



- Back in the 1950s, Gerald Fitzgerald, the founder of a religious order that treats Roman Catholic priests who molest children, concluded "(such) offenders were unlikely to change and should not be returned to ministry." But like Amos, he was ignored.
- In many cases the abusers were transferred to another church, and the high-ranking clergymen covered up the cases. For example, Cardinal Angelo Sodano was accused of blocking investigation of a high-profile case in the mid 1990's.



# Settlements



- After years of covering up the sex abuse cases by the top religious leaders, at last the scandal exploded. The Associated Press estimated the settlements of these sex abuse cases from 1950 to 2007 totaled more than \$2 billion. BishopAccountability estimated that it is more than \$3 billion in 2012.



# Losing my religion and found peace



- Lobdell, W. (2009). *Losing my religion: How I lost my faith reporting on religion in America and found unexpected peace*. New York: Harper.
- Dr. William Lobdell was a Christian who investigated the Catholic sex abuse cases. He reported that in one case a mother sent her daughter to a Catholic retreat camp. The young girl was raped by a group of priests and was pregnant.
- The church told the mother that her daughter was a “bad” girl, and then covered this up by sending the young girl out of the country.



- He also reported that he attended a church meeting. In the meeting the members voted to name a church after an abusing priest (The priest had admitted the crime). A policeman was among the audience. He stood up and yelled, “I am a cop. I see criminals every day. Shame on you! All of you are Christians. But no one ever mentioned the victims. And now you want to name a church after a criminal!”
- Dr. William Lobdell described that this experience is his “road to Damascus” (in a reversed fashion). Later **he lost his religion and found “unexpected peace.”**

# False sense of security among Israelites



- Some Israelites naively thought that practicing religion could make everything fine. At Amos's time, both the northern and southern Kingdom enjoyed prosperity, and people thought that the party would never end.
- But Amos made it very clear that religious rituals alone could not please God. Amos said, **"The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day"** (8:3).
- In Amos's view religious rituals, such as singing in the temple, could not accomplish anything religious.
- Rather, for Amos true religion had to come out from the bottom of the heart, and to arise from true faith to the Lord, and **a sense of reality (God is just and the Judgment Day will come)**.

# Prosperity Gospel



- When I was a young boy, one of the most influential books at that time was “**possible thinking**” by Pastor Robert Schuller, the founder of the Crystal Cathedral in California, the host of the program “Hour of Power.”
- The message is simple: always be positive; with God’s help you can make it.
- In 2000 the spokesman of the White House said: “The president (George Bush) believes that **we are a blessed nation.**”

# Bright-sided



- Ehrenreich, B. (2010). *Bright-sided: How positive thinking is undermining America*. New York: Picador.
- Evangelical mega-churches preach the good news that you only have to want something to get it, because **God wants to “prosper” you.**
- “Major religious leaders, especially on the Christian right, buttress this conceit with the notion that Americans are God’s chosen people and that America is the designated leader of the world.”



# Irrational optimism



- British observer Godfrey Hodgson has written that the American sense of exceptionalism has become harder and harder.
- “Those who set themselves up as instructors in the discipline of positive thinking— coaches, **preachers**, and gurus of various sorts—have described this effort with terms like “self-hypnosis,” “mind control,” and “thought control.” In other words, it requires deliberate self-deception, including a constant effort to repress or block out unpleasant possibilities and “negative” thoughts.”
- **Irrational optimism would result in disasters.**

# Take home messages



- Amaziah used his religious position to serve the King instead of the Lord. We should be careful when political ideology seems to supersede religious truths, such as endorsing a candidate while muting critics against heresy.
- Amaziah, the top religious leader, tried to cover up problems by forcing Amos to go away. We should not allow sins ballooning inside the Christian Church. The lesson of the Catholic sex abuse scandal and its cover up by cardinals and bishops is a very painful one.
- Amos warned his people that religion could lead to a false sense of security and hinder people from seeing the upcoming disasters. The true religion should not emphasize positive thinking and prosperity, and deny the possibility of any negative consequences.