

Dear Ohana,

I put together some things concerning, what I thought was one of the major points of our Lord's ministry while on earth and the current situation in Israel/Palestine today. This is coming to you in four parts. It somewhat reflects on our own political system in America. However, Americans will remain free to believe whatever they want - please continue to read.

ANTI-SEMITISM

PART 1

Part of the challenge for most people is the way the term "Gospel" is used. The word literally means "truth" or "belief," but is also used more specifically to mean the Christian message. Furthermore, the four books of the Bible that recount the life and crucifixion of Jesus - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - are referred to as "the Four Gospels." So when a person refers to "the Gospel that says....." it's unclear how the word is being used. It might mean "the Gospel" as "the truth" - meaning, this what a Bible-based Christian should believe. Or, when a person is referring to "the [one] Gospel that says Jesus was; crucified by the Jews," as opposed to the others that take at least some steps to blame the **religious and political leadership, and not the people.**

In the Gospel accounts - which often have different details - the Roman authorities and the Jewish religious leaders are both implicated in Jesus' crucifixion. Jewish religious leaders are upset with Him (Jesus) for offering new interpretations of **their religious laws**, interpretations which often pose a direct threat to the power structures in place. In addition, "the crowd" has some degree of culpability, though some of the Gospels take pains to highlight that this crowd was stirred up by the religious leaders.

The current conflict in Gaza is just one example of how important it is to separate the morality and culpability of the leaders from that of the people. Much of the Gospel text asks us to do this as well.

In most of the Gospel accounts, it's abundantly clear that the leaders are to blame. The Gospels of Luke and Mark ascribe the plot to the "chief priests and the scribes" (Luke 22:2 & Mark 14:1), **not to the people as a whole**. It is this council of religious leaders that brings Jesus before Pilate, the Gentile (non-believer) governor of Judea (Luke 23:1 & Mark 14:53 - here Mark adds "the elders"). When Pilate offers to release Jesus, a group Luke describes as "the chief priests, the leaders, and the people" (23:13) all demand that Pilate put Him to death. He's crucified by Roman soldiers - **NOT THE JEWS**.

Part 2

John's Gospel is more troubling, as it frequently refers to the crowd as "the Jews." (Since his took place in Jerusalem, the majority of the people, including Jesus and His disciples, would have been Jewish, after all.) But in spite of this language that may trouble our sensibilities today, it's clear that John also places the blame on the leadership, and not on the people. Things get a bit stickier with the Gospel according to Matthew - largely due to one deeply unfortunate line.

For most biblical scholars, Matthew's in-depth knowledge of Scripture and Jewish law indicates that he was an observant Jew, writing to an audience that was primarily Jewish as well. So his rhetoric against "the Jews" who do not accept Christ's divinity is more pointed than can be found in the other Gospels. Much of the account of Jesus' arrest and trial follows that of the other Gospels; it is clear that the religious authorities are the primary drivers. But as Jesus' crucifixion grows near, Pilate is increasingly frightened by how restless the crowd is getting.

Pilate is more sympathetic to Jesus in this account. As he washes his hands, he says, "See, I am innocent of this man's blood" (Matthew 27:24). The crowd then answers, "His blood be on us and on our children" (27:25). It's a horrifying line, one that the Guardian has called "the most notorious verse in the Bible." There are good reasons to read this line in the context of Matthew's Jewishness and see an author embroiled in a struggle about the direction of his own religious community, but the effects this verse has had are undeniable. For centuries, this was the verse that the Church (mainly the Church of Rome) used to justify persecution and murder of Jewish people.

Mel Gibson stepped in the same controversy with his film "The Passion of the Christ." While the screenplay was cobbled together from a variety of sources, the initial cut of the film included the crowd shouting this line from Matthew. Word that the scene had been included got out - and, after initially saying he would cut the scene - Gibson included the dialogue, but left it un-subtitled. I can only imagine the intent was to obscure the ugliness of the line while still remaining true to what he thought his Gospel source demanded, but I also worry that it just makes the line serve as a 'dog whistle.'

Part 3

Viewers who are prone to antisemitic interpretations understand perfectly well what line has been left without an English translation. (There are plenty of other problems with the film's depiction of Judaism - a few examples are following.) Gibson had four Gospel sources to work with and had to make choices about what to include and what to leave out. He chose to include this line (found in part two), in spite of its terrible history of being used to justify antisemitic violence.

A member of Congress makes a similar choice. While they might have you believe that their interpretation is "the Gospel," it's really just one way to read these accounts - and a particularly dangerous one. The Roman Catholic Church renounced the idea of Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus in an official 1960 document, and most of mainline Christianity has been in agreement in the wake of the Holocaust. (Institutions can take a very long time to get on the right side of history.) (As well as those with "hearts of stone.")

The Congressman's use of "the Gospel" would have us believe that the basic tenets of Christianity are under threat, when bill H.R. 6090 (2023 Awareness of Antisemitism Act) was passed, simply acknowledges that antisemitic tropes can do harm. The Congressman's use of this one indicates that they are, in fact, already well aware of antisemitism - aware enough to be a highly accomplished practitioner. For this person, this is just the latest outburst in a long line of outlandish statements that indicate they have no interest in a serious reading of the texts they claim to hold in such high esteem, or in building relationships with anyone outside their political tent. The bill "could convict Christians for believing the Gospel that says Jesus was handed over to Herod to be

crucified by the Jews." And especially since the bill adopts the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism, which includes "claims of Jews killing Jesus" as part of its definition. (For what it's worth, the ACLU has also spoken out against H.R. 6090, arguing that it "threatens to censor political speech which is critical of Israel.") Remember it is the Spiritual and Political leadership that should be singled out and not the people - the sheep. The same thing that was going on in Jesus' time - the corrupt Temple priest (spiritual leaders of His day) - is going on today in 2024. Even our "modern-day" churches have corrupt ministers and spiritual leaders. The very same corruption that our Lord Jesus protested against.

Part 4

There are twelve reasons why American Christianity is **RAPIDLY** falling apart and failing our Lord's commandments. American Christianity is experiencing a seismic shift, with many questioning its integrity, relevance, and impact in today's society. There are several critical issues within the contemporary Evangelical church why American Christianity is facing a crisis.

WACKY CHRISTIAN TV. The proliferation of questionable theological content on Christian television, particularly the prevalence of the "Prosperity Gospel," has weakened the foundation of faith for many believers.

EVANGELICAL SCANDALS. High-profile scandals involving prominent pastors have eroded trust and credibility within the church, raising questions about the qualifications and accountability of spiritual leaders.

POSTMODERNISM. The relativistic view of truth and interpretation has seeped into Christian theology, leading to a subjective approach to scripture and doctrine that undermines the authority of the Bible.

EVANGELISTIC WEAKNESS. The church's failure to prioritize individual evangelism has left many Christians spiritually malnourished and ill-equipped to share their faith effectively.

HIPSTER AND ROCKSTAR PASTORS. The glorification of pastors as cultural icons or celebrities has compromised the reverence and dignity of pastoral leadership, diverting attention away from the message of Christ.

PROSPERITY GOSPEL. The distortion of biblical teachings to promote material wealth and health has disillusioned many believers and obscured the true essence of the Gospel message.

LOW OR NO THEOLOGY. A lack of theological depth and understanding among Christians has resulted in a shallow faith that is susceptible to distortion and misinterpretation.

POLITICAL ACTIVISM. The entanglement of the church in political agendas has blurred the lines between spiritual and secular concerns, diverting attention from the primary mission of the sharing the Gospel.

NEO-GOSPEL. The reduction of Christianity to self-help or therapeutic solutions undermines the transformative power of the Gospel and promotes a shallow understanding of salvation.

FALSE CONVERSIONS. A failure to uphold the biblical standards for discipleship and repentance has led to a proliferation of false conversions within the church, characterized by nominal faith and moral compromise. This happens quite a bit in jails and prisons.

SEEKER SENSITIVITY. The pursuit of numerical growth and cultural relevance has often come at the expense of biblical fidelity, leading to compromises in preaching and worship that prioritize entertainment over edification.

LOW VIEW OF THE BIBLE. In the quest to understand the declining state of American Christianity, perhaps no factor looms larger than a pervasive low view of the Bible. This foundational issue strikes at the heart of the faith, challenging the very authority and relevance of scripture in the lives of believers. Over time, a shift has occurred, relegating the Bible to a mere collection of ancient texts, disconnected from modern life and perceived as inconsequential in the face of scientific advancement and cultural evolution.

As American Christianity grapples with these challenges, there is a pressing need for a return to a robust, Biblically grounded faith that prioritizes the Gospel message above all else. Only through a renewed commitment to scriptural authority, theological integrity, and faithful discipleship can

the church reclaim its relevance and effectiveness in a rapidly changing world.

Questions to consider:

How can individual Christians and church communities address these identified issues within American Christianity?

What role does personal responsibility play in cultivating a deeper, more authentic faith amidst the challenges facing contemporary Christianity?

In what ways might the church reclaim its role as a “beacon of truth and moral authority” in society, while remaining relevant and accessible to a diverse range of individuals?

How can Christians navigate the tension between cultural engagement and maintaining distinctiveness from secular ideologies?

What do you think? Time for an open discussion?

Eight most controversial topics in the church at large today:

1) Gay marriage and whether it should be permitted in the church are unquestionably at the top of the list of today’s contentious issues. 2) Abortion and women’s rights. 3) Women in leadership. 4) Type of worship music. 5) Spiritual Gifts. 6) Baptism. 7) Politics from the Pulpit. 8) Alcohol.

Eight ethical issues in religion: 1) Religious identity and authority. 2) The personal and the private. 3) Marriage and family. 4) Influences on and use of time, money and other personal resources. 5) The quality and value of life. 6) Questions of right and wrong. 7) Equality and difference. 8) Conflict and violence and global issues.

The moral dilemma of the Bible: Every ‘man’, especially the believer, is required to be perfect. But NO ‘man’ can be perfect; all ‘men’, including all believers, are sinners, and are incapable of being anything else.

Evangelicalism (evangelical Christianity) is a branch of Protestant Christianity characterized by an emphasis on the authority of the Bible, a relationship with Jesus Christ, and

conversion. “Evangelical Christians” tend to be more conservative in their theology and social beliefs and less forgiving than other branches of Christianity.

Baptists form a major branch of evangelical Protestantism distinguished by baptizing only profession Christian believers (believer’s baptism) and doing so by complete immersion.

The seven basics of Christianity: 1) God. The need to understand that God consists of three equal persons. 2) Jesus. The need to have a big picture understanding to know His importance. 3) The Holy Spirit. The need to understand God’s presence on earth. 4) The Bible. The need to understand that the Bible is God’s Holy Word. 5) Prayer. The need to understand the communication process between the believer(s) and the triune God. 6) Grace. The need to understand God’s love and guidance. 7) Community. The need to understand that individuals cannot do this alone. Jesus sent them out two by two.

Pastor Gary+

PS. Some of this was information I picked up – some of this came from the personal grey matter of an old man. All of it, I believe.