

COVID-19's Challenge to the Christian Church: What Would Jesus Do?

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Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#),
[Religion](#), [Science and Medicine](#)

"The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority."—Martin Luther King Jr. ([A Knock at Midnight](#), June 11, 1967)

In every age, we find ourselves wrestling with the question of how Jesus Christ—the itinerant preacher and revolutionary activist who died challenging the police state of his time, namely, the Roman Empire—would respond to the moral questions of our day.

For instance, what would Jesus do in the midst of a coronavirus pandemic?

Would he disregard social distancing guidelines to visit and tend to the sick and dying?

Would he take the assets belonging to those massive megachurches—the expensive real estate, the lucrative bank accounts—and put them to work where they can do the most good right now, tending to the sick, housing the homeless, and providing for the needy?

Would he advocate, as so many evangelical Christian leaders have done in recent years, for congregants to "submit to your leaders and those in authority," which in the American police state translates to complying, conforming, submitting, obeying orders, deferring to authority and generally doing whatever a government official tells you to do? Or would he defy government shutdowns to hold church worship services as some have done?

It's a quandary, all right: what *would* Jesus do?

Suddenly, that evangelical message of abject compliance to the government, no matter how immoral or unjust that government may seem, is running up against government mandates that test not only how far the religious community will go to exercise its religious freedoms but what that even means in a COVID-19 world.

As the world prepares to spend Holy Week and Easter Sunday in a state of near-isolation, varying degrees of lockdowns imposed by world governments to blunt the deadly impact of this novel coronavirus pandemic have all but ensured that there will be no massive Easter Egg hunts, no Easter parades, and no flower-bedecked church services this year.

We can debate and litigate and legislate whether churches have a lawful right to remain open during this pandemic and allow their congregants to worship in person, but surely Jesus would have us fight an altogether different battle.

Study the life and teachings of Jesus, and you may be surprised at how relevant he is to our modern age.

A radical nonconformist who challenged authority at every turn, Jesus spent his adult life speaking truth to power, challenging the status quo of his day, pushing back against the abuses of the Roman Empire, and [providing a blueprint for standing up to tyranny](#) that would be followed by those, religious and otherwise, who came after him.

Those living through this present age of militarized police, SWAT team raids, police shootings of unarmed citizens, roadside strip searches, invasive surveillance, and government lockdowns might feel as if these events are unprecedented, but the characteristics of a police state and its reasons for being are no different today than they were in Jesus' lifetime: control, power and money.

Much like the American Empire today, the Roman Empire of Jesus' day was characterized by secrecy, surveillance, a widespread police presence, a citizenry treated like suspects with little recourse against the police state, perpetual wars, a military empire, martial law, and political retribution against those who dared to challenge the power of the state.

A police state extends far beyond the actions of law enforcement. In fact, a police state "is [characterized by bureaucracy, secrecy, perpetual wars, a nation of suspects, militarization, surveillance, widespread police presence, and a citizenry with little recourse against police actions.](#)"

Indeed, the police state in which Jesus lived and its striking similarities to modern-day America are beyond troubling.

Secrecy, surveillance and rule by the elite. As the chasm between the wealthy and poor grew wider in the Roman Empire, the [ruling class and the wealthy class became synonymous](#), while the lower classes, increasingly deprived of their political freedoms, grew disinterested in the government and easily distracted by "bread and circuses." Much like America today, with its lack of government transparency, overt domestic surveillance, and [rule by the rich](#), the inner workings of the Roman Empire were [shrouded in secrecy](#), while its leaders were constantly on the watch for any potential threats to its power. The [resulting state-wide surveillance was primarily carried out by the military](#), which acted as investigators, enforcers, torturers, policemen, executioners and jailers. Today that role is fulfilled by the NSA, the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security and the increasingly militarized police forces across the country.

Widespread police presence. The Roman Empire used its military forces to maintain the "peace," thereby establishing a police state that reached into all aspects of a citizen's life. In this way, these military officers, used to address a broad range of routine problems and conflicts, enforced the will of the state. Today SWAT teams, comprised of local police and federal agents, are employed to [carry out routine search warrants for minor crimes](#) such as marijuana possession and credit card fraud.

Citizenry with little recourse against the police state. As the Roman Empire expanded, [personal freedom and independence nearly vanished](#), as did any real sense of local governance and national consciousness. Similarly, in America today, [citizens largely feel powerless](#), voiceless and unrepresented in the face of a power-hungry federal government. As states and localities are brought under direct control by federal agencies and regulations,

a sense of learned helplessness grips the nation.

Perpetual wars and a military empire. Much like America today with its practice of policing the world, [war and an over-arching militarist ethos provided the framework for the Roman Empire](#), which extended from the Italian peninsula to all over Southern, Western, and Eastern Europe, extending into North Africa and Western Asia as well. In addition to significant foreign threats, [wars were waged against inchoate, unstructured and socially inferior foes](#).

Martial law. Eventually, Rome established a permanent military dictatorship that left the citizens at the mercy of an unreachable and oppressive totalitarian regime. In the absence of resources to establish civic police forces, the Romans relied increasingly on the military to intervene in all matters of conflict or upheaval in provinces, from small-scale scuffles to large-scale revolts. Not unlike police forces today, with their [martial law training drills on American soil](#), militarized weapons and “shoot first, ask questions later” mindset, the Roman soldier had [“the exercise of lethal force at his fingertips”](#) with the potential of wreaking havoc on normal citizens’ lives.

A nation of suspects. Just as the American Empire looks upon its citizens as suspects to be tracked, surveilled and controlled, the Roman Empire looked upon all potential insubordinates, from the common thief to a full-fledged insurrectionist, as [threats to its power](#). The insurrectionist was [seen as directly challenging the Emperor](#). A “bandit,” or [revolutionist](#), was seen as capable of overturning the empire, was always considered guilty and deserving of the most savage penalties, including capital punishment. Bandits were usually punished publicly and cruelly as a means of [detering others from challenging the power of the state](#). Jesus’ execution was one such public punishment.

Acts of civil disobedience by insurrectionists. Starting with his act of civil disobedience at the Jewish temple, the site of the administrative headquarters of the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish council, Jesus branded himself a political revolutionary. When Jesus “with the help of his disciples, blocks the entrance to the courtyard” and forbids “anyone carrying goods for sale or trade from entering the Temple,” he committed a blatantly criminal and seditious act, an act “that undoubtedly precipitated his arrest and execution.” Because the commercial events were sponsored by the religious hierarchy, which in turn was operated by consent of the Roman government, Jesus’ attack on the money changers and traders can be seen as an [attack on Rome itself](#), an unmistakable declaration of political and social independence from the Roman oppression.

Military-style arrests in the dead of night. Jesus’ arrest account testifies to the fact that the Romans perceived Him as a revolutionary. Eerily similar to today’s SWAT team raids, Jesus was arrested in the middle of the night, in secret, by a [large, heavily armed fleet of soldiers](#). Rather than merely asking for Jesus when they came to arrest him, his pursuers collaborated beforehand with Judas. Acting as a government informant, Judas concocted a kiss as a secret identification marker, hinting that a level of deception and trickery must be used to obtain this seemingly “dangerous revolutionist’s” cooperation.

Torture and capital punishment. In Jesus’ day, religious preachers, self-proclaimed prophets and nonviolent protesters were not summarily arrested and executed. Indeed, the high priests and Roman governors normally allowed a protest, particularly a small-scale one, to run its course. However, government authorities were quick to dispose of leaders and

movements that appeared to threaten the Roman Empire. The charges leveled against Jesus—that he was a threat to the stability of the nation, opposed paying Roman taxes and claimed to be the rightful King—were purely political, not religious. To the Romans, any one of these charges was enough to merit death by crucifixion, which was usually reserved for slaves, non-Romans, radicals, revolutionaries and the worst criminals.

Jesus was presented to Pontius Pilate “[as a disturber of the political peace](#),” a leader of a rebellion, a political threat, and most gravely—a claimant to kingship, a “king of the revolutionary type.” After Jesus is formally condemned by Pilate, he is sentenced to death by crucifixion, “the Roman means of executing criminals convicted of high treason.” The purpose of crucifixion was not so much to kill the criminal, as it was an immensely public statement intended to visually warn all those who would challenge the power of the Roman Empire. Hence, it was reserved solely for the most extreme political crimes: treason, rebellion, sedition, and banditry. After being ruthlessly whipped and mocked, Jesus was nailed to a cross.

As Professor Mark Lewis Taylor observed:

The cross within Roman politics and culture was a marker of shame, of being a criminal. If you were put to the cross, you were marked as shameful, as criminal, but especially as subversive. And there were thousands of people put to the cross. The cross was actually positioned at many crossroads, and, as New Testament scholar Paula Fredricksen has reminded us, it served as kind of a public service announcement that said, “Act like this person did, and this is how you will end up.”

Jesus—the revolutionary, the political dissident, and the nonviolent activist—lived and died in a police state. Any reflection on Jesus’ life and death within a police state must take into account several factors: Jesus spoke out strongly against such things as empires, controlling people, state violence and power politics. Jesus challenged the political and religious belief systems of his day. And worldly powers feared Jesus, not because he challenged them for control of thrones or government but because he undercut their claims of supremacy, and he dared to speak truth to power in a time when doing so could—and often did—cost a person his life.

Unfortunately, the radical Jesus, the political dissident who took aim at injustice and oppression, has been largely forgotten today, replaced by a congenial, smiling Jesus trotted out for religious holidays but otherwise rendered mute when it comes to matters of war, power and politics.

Yet for those who truly study the life and teachings of Jesus, the resounding theme is one of outright resistance to war, materialism and empire.

Ultimately, as I point out in my book [Battlefield America: The War on the American People](#), this is the contradiction that must be resolved if the radical Jesus—the one who stood up to the Roman Empire and was crucified as a warning to others not to challenge the powers-that-be—is to be an example for our modern age.

After all, there is so much suffering and injustice in the world, and so much good that can be done by those who truly aspire to follow Jesus Christ’s example.

We must decide whether we will follow the path of least resistance—willing to turn a blind eye to what Martin Luther King Jr. referred to as the “evils of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination, to the moral degeneracy of religious bigotry and the corroding effects of narrow sectarianism, to economic conditions that deprive men of work and food, and to the insanities of militarism and the self-defeating effects of physical violence”—or whether we will be [transformed nonconformists](#) “dedicated to justice, peace, and brotherhood.”

As King explained in a powerful [sermon delivered in 1954](#), “This command not to conform comes ... [from] Jesus Christ, the world’s most dedicated nonconformist, whose ethical nonconformity still challenges the conscience of mankind.”

We need to recapture the gospel glow of the early Christians, who were nonconformists in the truest sense of the word and refused to shape their witness according to the mundane patterns of the world. Willingly they sacrificed fame, fortune, and life itself in behalf of a cause they knew to be right. Quantitatively small, they were qualitatively giants. Their powerful gospel put an end to such barbaric evils as infanticide and bloody gladiatorial contests. Finally, they captured the Roman Empire for Jesus Christ... The hope of a secure and livable world lies with disciplined nonconformists, who are dedicated to justice, peace, and brotherhood. The trailblazers in human, academic, scientific, and religious freedom have always been nonconformists. In any cause that concerns the progress of mankind, put your faith in the nonconformist!

...Honesty impels me to admit that transformed nonconformity, which is always costly and never altogether comfortable, may mean walking through the valley of the shadow of suffering, losing a job, or having a six-year-old daughter ask, “Daddy, why do you have to go to jail so much?” But we are gravely mistaken to think that Christianity protects us from the pain and agony of mortal existence. Christianity has always insisted that the cross we bear precedes the crown we wear. To be a Christian, one must take up his cross, with all of its difficulties and agonizing and tragedy-packed content, and carry it until that very cross leaves its marks upon us and redeems us to that more excellent way that comes only through suffering.

In these days of worldwide confusion, there is a dire need for men and women who will courageously do battle for truth. We must make a choice. Will we continue to march to the drumbeat of conformity and respectability, or will we, listening to the beat of a more distant drum, move to its echoing sounds? Will we march only to the music of time, or will we, risking criticism and abuse, march to the soul saving music of eternity?

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