

## Crucifying Jesus: Killing a Radical

Written by John W. Whitehead  
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*“[Jesus] was surely one of the great ethical innovators of history. The Sermon on the Mount is way ahead of its time. His ‘turn the other cheek’ anticipated Gandhi and Martin Luther King by two thousand years. It was not for nothing that I wrote an article called ‘Atheists for Jesus’ (and was delighted to be presented with a T-shirt bearing the legend).” – Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion (2006)*

For those who profess to be Christians, the week leading up to Easter is the most sacred time of the year, commemorating as it does the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet while Jesus is a revered religious figure, he was also, as atheist Richard Dawkins recognizes, a radical in his own right whose life and teachings changed the course of history.

Too often today radicalism is equated with terrorism, extremism, and other violent acts of resistance. Yet true radicalism, the kind embodied by such revolutionary figures as Jesus Christ, Martin Luther King Jr., and Gandhi, actually involves speaking truth to power through peaceful, nonviolent means. Separated by time and distance, Christ, King, and Gandhi were viewed as dangerous by their respective governments because they challenged the oppressive status quo of their day.

Jesus, in particular, undermined the political and religious establishment of his day through his teachings. For example, when Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers” – exhorting his followers to turn the other cheek and give freely – he was telling us that active peacemaking is the way to end war. Indeed, if everything Jesus said on the Sermon on the Mount is true – a message that King, to his peril, adopted in protest of the Vietnam War – there’d be no need for wars, war budgets, or military industrial complexes. Imagine that.

Unfortunately, as the gruesome torture and crucifixion of Jesus make clear, there is always a price to pay for standing up to one’s oppressors. While the New Testament Gospels are the primary source for accounts of Jesus’ suffering, crucifixion, and death, his ordeal at the hands of Roman soldiers has been the topic of scholarly research for years. Indeed, as *Time* magazine reports, the latest topic of academic scrutiny involves claims by an Israeli television journalist that he may have uncovered the crucifixion nails used on Jesus – “smallish iron spikes with the tips hammered to one side.”

Certainly, the torture Jesus endured was agonizing. Yet what was it about him that caused the Romans to view him as enough of a threat to make an example of him and have him crucified?

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In the time of Jesus, religious preachers and self-proclaimed prophets were not summarily arrested and executed. Nor were nonviolent protesters. Indeed, the high priests and Roman governors in Jerusalem would normally allow a protest, particularly a small-scale one, to run its course. However, government authorities were quick to dispose of leaders and movements that even 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 as Messiah of Israel (the gravest charge, for which Jesus was ultimately crucified, as inscribed on the cross: “The King of the Jews”) – were purely political, not religious. To the Romans, any one of these charges was enough to merit death by crucifixion. Crucifixion itself, usually reserved for slaves, non-Romans, radicals, revolutionaries, and the worst criminals, was not only a common method for execution by Romans but was also the most feared.

The Gospels recount how, after Jesus’ arrest, temple guards brought him to the Jewish High Priest Caiaphas, who declared him guilty of blasphemy. He was then ushered before the Sanhedrin, a Jewish council, which sought permission from the Romans to execute him. Whether an actual “trial” took place before Jesus was handed over to the Romans is uncertain. But more than likely, as he was moved from place to place, he was spat upon and beaten.

It is telling that the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, who alone had the authority to execute Jesus, focused on his political identity: “Are you the king of the Jews?” (Matthew 27:11). This seems to be primarily what mattered to Pilate, whose job it was to uphold the religious, as well as the temporal, power of the deified Caesars.

Jesus does not deny the allegation that, if true, will lead to his death. He answers: “You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me” (John 18:37).

In other words, Jesus told Pilate – the one person who held Jesus’ life in his hands – to stick it. The cruel torture and killing of Jesus were certain to follow after that. The fact that Jesus was killed for claiming to be king of the Jews was not an afterthought pinned on the cross above his head. The Roman soldiers commissioned to prepare him for execution knew this was the issue. That is why they gave him the burlesque of coronation, clothing him in royal purple with a mock

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crown and scepter. Then they abased themselves and called out, "Hail, king of the Jews!" (John 19:3). Afterward, they beat Jesus.

Within a religious context, Jesus' death was a sacrificial act of atonement for the sins of the world. In a historical context, his crucifixion sent a chilling warning to all those who would challenge the power of the Roman Empire. As Mark Lewis Taylor, the Maxwell M. Upson Professor of Theology & Culture at Princeton Theological Seminary, observed in an interview with *OldSpeak*:

"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.'"

Unlike the modern church that drowns in materialism and supports the military empire, Jesus advocated love, peace, and harmony. As it did in his day, this message when adhered to undermines the ruling establishment. Unfortunately, it is rare for the church today to challenge the status quo – a failing that Martin Luther King Jr. recognized in his famous "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" when he castigated the modern-day church for being "so often the arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are."

Written on April 16, 1963, while King was serving a jail sentence for participating in civil-rights demonstrations, the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" was a response to eight prominent white Alabama clergymen who had called on African Americans to cease their civil disobedience and let the courts handle the problem of desegregation. King's words reminded Americans that the early church – the church established by Jesus' followers – would never have been content to remain silent while injustice and persecution ruled the land:

"There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town, the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being 'disturbers of the peace' and 'outside agitators.' They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests."

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It is unfortunate that 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. “Christianity today often resembles an egg into which someone has poked a hole and sucked out all its contents,” writes author Richard Smoley in *Forbidden Faith* (2006), “and then taken the shell, encrusted it with gold and jewels, and set it up as an object of veneration. In many ways, it remains a beautiful shell, but more and more people are finding that it no longer offers any nourishment. If they complain, they’re usually told that they just need to have more faith – which is of course no answer at all.”

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. As Mark Lewis Taylor notes, “The power of Jesus is one that enables us to critique the nation and the empire. Unfortunately, that gospel is being sacrificed and squandered by Christians who have cozied up to power and wealth.” Ultimately, 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 to not challenge the powers-that-be – is to be remembered.

*This is an edited version of a longer commentary. The full version can be found [here](#).*

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