

# Jesus was an occupier

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[Recently I wrote a piece](#) responding to [Tony Perkins's piece at CNN](#) in which he claims that Jesus was not an occupier, but was “a free-marketer.” Well, his piece upset me so much I’ve decided to write *another* response to that ludicrous claim. So, here you go:

Theologically speaking, Christians have a variety of answers to the question of why Jesus was killed: to appease God’s anger for human sin, to bear the just punishment owed to God by a sinful humanity, as a moral example of suffering love for God that future Christians should follow, as a sacrifice offered to God for the forgiveness of human sin, as the ultimate example of God’s unending love for humanity, and several other formulations. Historically speaking, however, there is a nearly universally accepted answer among scholars as to why he was killed: Because Jesus occupied the temple.

During Jesus’ life the temple in Jerusalem was the symbolic center of Jewish religious, political, legal, *and economic* power. It was, in the words of one of my former Bible professors, the White House, Supreme Court, and Federal Reserve combined. During the time of Jesus’ life the temple had a practice of using “moneychangers.” Moneychangers had the task of exchanging Roman and other money for ‘temple money,’ and charged an exorbitantly high exchange rate to do so. So, the poor, in order to pay their temple taxes or for the animals needed to go through with their religious sacrifices, had to pay more than real value for this necessity. This practice was especially unjust in light of the fact that God allowed for different animals to be sacrificed by people of different socio-economic classes to avoid placing too great a burden on the poor. This temple practice, in spirit if not letter, was a direct violation of God’s law which was constructed with an eye toward helping the poor.

Jesus, within the week that he was killed, became quite angry about this practice. He turned over the tables of the moneychangers and chased the animals and those selling them out of the temple courtyard where this was practiced. He even made a whip and drove people out condemning the powerful for their perversion of holy space and exploitation of the poor and accusing them of turning the house of God, a house of prayer, into a “den of robbers.” Jesus occupied the temple. And they quickly killed him for it.

The Gospel of Mark informs us that it is after this incident that the religious leaders began plotting about how to kill Jesus (Mark 11:18). No longer was Jesus only someone who challenged their religious traditions and authority; now he was messing with their money. Jesus chose to occupy the temple and those he offended chose to have him occupy the cross instead.

Historically speaking, Jesus was a religious leader put to death by the Roman Empire for being a political threat. What was that threat? Jesus challenged the reigning political-economic system (which was also tied to religion) by taking over the space those in power claimed to hold a monopoly over. He shut-down, even if only for a very short-time, the reigning economic system that contributed to reifying the positions of the rich and poor in ancient Israel. He was killed for being an occupier.

I do not share this story to claim that Jesus’ actions in the temple naturally lead to the actions of those occupying Wall Street. Rather, I tell this story because there are some who are claiming that Jesus was not an occupier, and implying that those who are currently occupying Wall Street and other streets are in some way unchristian. This sort of claim is historically inaccurate. In fact, Jesus’ life makes no sense, historically speaking, without the decisive moment leading to his death being that he actually was an occupier.

What does this mean for us today?

It means that we cannot dismiss out of hand the actions of the occupy movement as inherently unchristian or anti-Jesus. Rather, it seems that

people engaging in such activity should receive the benefit of the doubt that they are, in fact, being quite faithful to at least one of the key moments in Jesus' life. Those who oppose such actions and defend the reigning economic system are the ones who bear the burden of proof that they are, in fact, remaining faithful to the example and teachings of Jesus the occupier.

I am not claiming that the occupy movement is, in fact, representative of what Jesus would do today or that it is a new form of church. Rather, I am simply stating that those who claim such actions can have nothing to do with the way of Jesus have seemingly missed a historical fact: Jesus was, perhaps the first, occupier.

*Originally posted [at McCarty's blog](#)*