

How should Christians think about PRISM?

By [Daniel Schultz](#)

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When news broke last week about PRISM, the National Security Agency's huge data-mining program, I wondered what the Bible might have to say about privacy.

Turns out the exact word occurs only once in the NRSV, in Sirach. "Private" comes up 24 times, usually as a gloss on idiomatic expressions. Scripture writers seem to have had the idea that some rooms were not meant to be seen by everyone, some conversations not meant for everyone's ears. But they lived in a tribal world, and the concept of "[a right to live one's life 'screened from public observation'](#)" doesn't seem to have occurred to them.

I learned this using a searchable Bible site. The record of my search is now stored on a Google server somewhere. Presumably, no spy agency is interested in my Bible reading. But it would be easy to add a bot to track user information at that site or just about any other.

One such data point acquires value only when you put it together with others. An enterprising spy might notice that I've followed the NSA story in some detail. More intriguingly, I've had some contact with Glenn Greenwald—who [broke the story](#)—as well as with [Marcy Wheeler](#) and others who have tracked it. More digging would turn up connections to religious activists of all sorts.

I haven't talked to Greenwald in a while. But had we traded e-mails last week or the week before, the FBI or another agency could have gotten a secret warrant to poke through parts of my Gmail account, phone records or online activity. They wouldn't be able to read the actual e-mails or listen to the calls, but they could see who I talked to when—and where my phone was.

And this [metadata](#) can yield a treasure trove of information. As Jane Mayer [explains](#), the location of cell phones can indicate a meeting or a romantic relationship. Patterns of calls can reveal impending corporate takeovers, sensitive medical information or reporters' sources.

Law enforcement agencies have used such data to catch fugitives and track terrorist cells. It's how they caught Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, among others. But in repressive nations, the same information has been used to monitor and disrupt opposition groups. It's remarkably easy to use connections made through cell phones and social media to convince people that they're being watched 24/7. This makes dividing and conquering a snap: a visit from the police or, even better, an anonymous e-mail or call.

Historically, this kind of thing is what police states have been about. It's not blackmail they're after, or even evidence of seditious activity. It's convincing people that they can't trust anyone, which makes it that much harder to challenge the ruling power.

Of course, there's no hard evidence that electronic surveillance has been used to tamp down dissent in the U.S. But what's troubling is that we don't know the full extent of these programs. We have to take elected officials at their word that they're not being misused.

As Peter Laarman [notes](#), there hasn't been a lot of religious reaction to the PRISM story yet. I wonder if it's because religious leaders don't know *how* to respond. Is this about human rights? Is it about the common good, or loving the neighbor? I'd suggest three ways to look at this issue through the lens of faith:

- Government has a legitimate purpose and authority, but dividing citizens from one another should never be part of it. We should demand safeguards to prevent PRISM and similar programs from being used for repressive purposes. At a minimum, this ought to include full disclosure of the government's purpose and methods here. (Lest you think this is a

hypothetical concern, remember that the FBI has surveilled groups such as the American Friends Service Committee as recently as 2006.)

- Surveillance comes about as part of the government's promise to keep us safe and secure. But only God can provide ultimate security—not invulnerability to threat but God's transformative support and presence amid our vulnerability. We follow the one who went to his death rather than depend on armed revolution to accomplish his goals. We should be relentless in questioning the government's claims about what we need to be protected from and how.
- Our connections to others make us human. We can work to build stronger communities, and we can refuse to fear our neighbor. This might cost us some of the individual privacy our culture prizes. But we can receive in return a society that doesn't need or tolerate intrusive spying to keep it safe.

Freedom, in the end, means living your values even when it's costly. You can tell the NSA I said so.