



Surveillance and Social Justice

Bible Study Notes

Surveillance is part of everyday life. Ordinary people are subject to surveillance and use monitoring technologies in professional and personal roles.

Where do you, your family and friends, encounter surveillance?
How do you practice surveillance?

Although surveillance has positive and negative effects much of it appears to be driven by fear.

Where do you see fear in society?
How might the 'perfect love [which] drives out fear' (1 John 4:18) respond?

Surveillance can be defined as 'the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction'.¹

When have you given consent to surveillance?
How informed would you say that consent was/ is?

Much of our lives are turned into data. National security is a significant argument for increased surveillance.

How often do 'national security' concerns feature in the TV news programmes you watch, the newspapers you read, or the social media you follow?
How is that agenda shaping your perception of the world?

Deterring and investigating welfare fraud is another major justification made for surveillance. But public perceptions, fuelled by sections of the media, are often wildly mistaken. For example, there is a widespread perception that £24 in every £100 claimed in welfare benefits is fraudulent; the actual figure is 70p in every £100.²

How might Christians help correct public misperceptions?

It's often claimed that if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear from surveillance. But we still close our bedroom curtains and limit access to our medical records.

Have there been times when you had something to hide? From whom, and why?

'Surveillance from the Cross' is a way for Christians to think about the importance of solidarity with all those facing unjust surveillance. 'Surveillance from the Cross' reminds us that God's watching over us is an act of love.

When have you found it comforting to believe that God is watching you?
When have you been unsettled at the idea that you are always under God's gaze?

God knows, but does not gather 'information'. Privacy can be considered a gift from God that creates space for us to flourish, including by making mistakes.

¹ David Lyon, *Surveillance Studies: An Overview* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 14.

² IPSOS MORI, *Perils of Perception* (London: Royal Statistical Society, King's College London and Ipsos MORI, 2013).



How do you use your privacy to grow as a person?

The bible does not emphasise privacy per se but we can find social practices there that have some similarities to how we practice privacy today. Instead of 'privacy' we can look for instances in the bible where people made themselves, or were made, more or less visible in social settings.

In what settings do you aim to make yourself less visible?

When do you try to make yourself more visible?

Read the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19) and see where you can find different ways in which he makes himself (or is made) more visible.

Gathering data for biomedical research affirms the value of this form of surveillance. Increasingly sophisticated programmes are sometimes able to de-anonymised research data.

How might de-anonymise data pose a threat to people's privacy?

Borders are sites of acute surveillance often linked to prejudice against minorities.

What do you consider to be a Christian response to people crossing borders as (a) refugees, (b) asylum-seekers, and (c) economic migrants?

A Christian counter-vision of surveillance can be expressed in a prayer (based on Ps 139).

O Lord, we are being searched and known...Such knowledge is too unnerving for us.

O Lord, we are searching and knowing...Such knowledge is too tempting for us.

O Lord, you have searched us and known us...Such knowledge is too wonderful for us

If you would like to explore these issues further, you can read the full report to the 2017 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Download at:

www.srtp.org.uk/srtp/view_article/surveillance_and_social_justice_may_2017