

# What Would Jesus Do in Alabama?

A two-ton rock and a new tax code present the people of Alabama with a clear and present opportunity to ask the question that counts, “What would Jesus do?”

The rock is a 2.6 ton granite display featuring the Ten Commandments. It was set up in the lobby of the state Supreme Court building in Montgomery by Chief Justice Roy Moore. He was elected to the office with the help of the slogan, “Still the Ten Commandments Judge.”

When the federal judges told Moore to remove the rock, he refused; and thousands of Bible-waving, hymn-singing people came to his defense. “I must acknowledge God,” he said, explaining his position.

This raises the question: How do we “acknowledge God” as citizens of these United States?

Some in this southern state think it has nothing to do with the two-ton rock but rather with the new tax proposal that will be on the ballot this fall.

“It has been well documented that Alabama’s state tax structure is the worst in the nation.” So begins the 21-page brief written by Professor Susan Pace Hamill of the University of Alabama School of Law.

High rates of sales tax and low rates of property tax, she explains, places an unequal burden upon the poor, who own no land but must buy groceries and clothing.

The tax rate for the vast stretches of timberland averages \$1 per acre. This keeps rural school districts from securing sufficient funds to support schools, leaving Alabama’s public education at the bottom of the national pile.

The system is not fair, Hamill contends in an open letter to political leaders of the state; it favors the rich and oppresses the poor. “Biblically based Judeo-Christian

ethical principles hold you to the highest level of accountability to eliminate this injustice poisoning our state.”

Her crusade for justice in the name of Jesus arose out of a mid-career course in theology at the Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham. Her awareness of social inequities was confronted by the plain teaching of Holy Scripture. In an appeal to Christians in the state, she wrote: “The Bible has a great deal to say about how individual people and their communities must treat the poor, powerless and needy among them.”

Her most important convert was Gov. Bob Riley, like Moore and Hamill, a devout Christian. He has presented to the people a proposal to transform the tax structure of state.

The ballot initiative will not only raise taxes, but will do so by distributing the responsibility more evenly among the citizens and corporations of Alabama. “We have no other choice,” Riley said, giving testimony to the role his own Christian principles have played in this process.

The tax has not received as much attention as the rock. This is unfortunate, for the equitable distribution of the wealth of the land and the proper care of those in need more surely represents the values of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

Jesus had much to say about generosity, justice and the poor. The questions of Judgment Day bear this out: “I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; I was naked and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you cared for me; I was in prison and you came to see me.”

Jesus also had much to say about the public display of religion, mostly in the way of warning.

One of his most famous stories describes the religious man coming into the public place and declaring his faith in God while the sinner stood afar off and humbly sought forgiveness. Religious hypocrites love to be seen in public, he said,

showing signs of their devotion: beware such people, Jesus said.

The rock is the public symbol of faith. The tax is the substantive act of faith.

If those who expend their energy defending the need for the two-ton symbol of God would give equal time and talent to the cause of economic and social justice, they would be acting, it seems to me, in accordance with the spirit and practice of Jesus.

In other words, they would be “acknowledging God” exactly as Jesus would do!

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