

Stewards of Truth:
Reconciling Open Access and Christian Faith
By Marc MacArthur

Across the modern world, a struggle over information is unfolding. Publishers, corporations, and governments have built barriers: paywalls, firewalls, and restrictive licenses. All to limit who may see and use knowledge. Opposite them stand activists who insist that information is a right, not a privilege. These “hacktivists” often go beyond advocacy, bypassing restrictions and redistributing data as acts of protest and preservation.

For a Christian this can raise deep questions. We are commanded to live honestly, to respect authority, to avoid theft (Romans 13:1–2; Exodus 20:15). Yet we are also called to love our neighbor (Matthew 22:39), to protect truth, and to resist when law is twisted into a tool of oppression. How can these tensions be reconciled?

The Scriptures affirm that “the earth is the LORD’s, and the fulness thereof” (Psalm 24:1¹). All knowledge, whether drawn from creation or from human inquiry, is ultimately His. To preserve and share truth is to act as stewards of His gifts. When discoveries that could save lives or relieve suffering are hidden behind paywalls, or when records of history are quietly erased, we are witnessing not simply bureaucratic decisions but moral failures. Christians should feel the weight of such loss, for we of all people know what it means to depend on preserved words. Without faithful scribes and translators across centuries, the Bible itself might have been lost to us. “The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever” (Isaiah 40:8).

Hacktivists see themselves as defenders of memory and truth. They argue that laws are often written to protect power rather than justice, and they point to moments in history when disobedience to law was necessary for righteousness. It was once illegal to teach slaves to read, to shelter Jews during the Holocaust, or to translate the Scriptures into the common tongue. The apostles themselves were commanded not to speak in the name of Christ, but they answered, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

In this light, the hacktivist’s work is not always chaos for its own sake. At its best, it is an effort to ensure that knowledge does not vanish when it is most needed, that history cannot be rewritten by those in power, and that truth is not bought and sold as if it were a

¹ All Scripture is KJV unless otherwise noted

commodity. Christians can sympathize with this impulse, even when the methods raise ethical questions.

Yet sympathy cannot mean uncritical approval. The commandment not to steal, the call to live peaceably, and the demand to “provide things honest in the sight of all men” (Romans 12:17) are not suspended because the cause appears noble. Where lawful avenues exist, Christians are bound to use them: publishing in open-access journals, releasing work into the public domain, supporting libraries, creating repositories, and advocating reform through transparent and public means. These are not lesser paths but expressions of the generosity and stewardship Scripture commends.

Still, history shows that there are moments when law and righteousness part ways. Translators of the Bible defied kings to bring God’s Word to the people. Early believers gathered illegally when worship was forbidden. In such cases, obedience to God required disobedience to men, and the faithful accepted the consequences with humility. If hacktivists today sometimes act from that same place, seeking not profit or notoriety but the preservation of truth against erasure, then Christians may see in their defiance a reflection of biblical civil disobedience. The standard, however, must remain high: acts must be proportionate, aimed at genuine neighbor-love, careful to avoid needless harm, and carried out with a willingness to bear the cost.

For believers, the challenge is to walk a path of faithful openness. This begins with a posture of generosity, recognizing that truth is not ours to hoard but God’s to share. It means laboring for lawful openness first, exhausting every honest means before considering protest. It means preserving the memory of God’s works, of history, and of cultural knowledge with diligence and care. And it means acknowledging, soberly, that there may be moments when conscience demands resistance to unjust laws. “To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (James 4:17).

What distinguishes the Christian from the activist is not zeal but posture. The world often glorifies defiance for its own sake; Christians act not out of pride or anger, but out of love for neighbor and obedience to God. The world may seek secrecy as a shield; Christians, even when driven to resist, must act in ways that preserve integrity and bear open witness to their faith.

The open access struggle is not merely a political or technological issue, it is a moral one. Knowledge can be hoarded or it can be shared, erased or preserved, commodified or treated as a common good. Hacktivists, for all their flaws, have forced the world to

confront this reality. Their defiance sometimes recalls the biblical call to resist injustice and to keep truth alive.

But Christians must go further. We are not only preservers of knowledge, but witnesses to the God of truth. Our calling is to guard memory without losing integrity, to open what has been closed without resorting to deceit, and to act always in ways that glorify Christ. When we succeed in this, we demonstrate that the greatest preservation project of all is not merely the keeping of human records, but the testimony of the Gospel itself, unshackled, unforgotten, and freely shared with all.

“With enough of us, around the world, we’ll not just send a strong message opposing the privatization of knowledge — we’ll make it a thing of the past. Will you join us?”

--Aaron Swartz