

**A Letter to
the Minister of Justice [1979]**
- a personal declaration of faith -

Allan A. Boesak

24 August 1979

[The Minister of Justice
Mr. A. Schlebusch
Pretoria]

Dear Mr. Minister,

A short while ago you thought it right to address sharply the South African Council of Churches [SACC] as well as church leaders, over radio and television and in the press, in connection with the SACC-resolution on **civil disobedience**. Although the decision was not taken as a direct result of my address at the meeting, I had expressed my point of view openly on that occasion and I was one of the people who supported the SACC-resolution.

You are Minister of Justice and in this capacity you have issued your serious warning. **I take your words seriously**. Hence my reaction, which I express with all respect, and which you must read particularly as a personal declaration of faith.

Your warning has become almost customary in South Africa. In it you continually point out to pastors and churches that they must keep themselves "out of politics" and confine themselves to their "proper" task: the preaching of the gospel.

Here already an extremely important question emerges: **what** is the gospel of Jesus Christ which the churches have been called to preach? Surely it is the message of the salvation which God offers to all people through Jesus Christ. It is the proclamation of the kingdom, and of the lordship of Christ. But this salvation is the making whole of the *whole person*. It is not meant for one's "inner life", or should, only. It is meant for one's whole human existence. This Jesus who is

Boesak, Allan A. (1979): *A Letter to the South African Minister of Justice*. In: Boesak, Allan A. (1984): *Walking on Thorns The Call to Christian Obedience*. Geneva: World Council of Churches (No. 22: Risk book series) ISBN 0-8028-0041-6 (pbk.) (65 pages) (pages 58-65)

Transcription (with own emphases and [explanatory notes]) for Study-purposes:

[iNgxoxo/Symposion: KAIROS 2012](#)
[iThuba-Nhlahla eMzansi-Afrika](#)
[Seminar KAIROS](#)

07.06.2012

proclaimed by the church was surely not only a spiritual being with spiritual qualities estranged from the reality of our human existence. No, he is the 'Word become flesh', who took on complete human form, and his message of liberation is meant for the total person in his or her *full humanity*.

Besides, the fact that the term *kingdom* is so politically loaded, must already say a great deal to us. For example, the fact that reformed Christians have rightly professed with conviction throughout the centuries that the lordship of Christ applies to *all* spheres of our lives - the political, social and economic spheres also. The Lord rules over all these, and the church and the Christian proclaim God's sovereignty in all these spheres. Surely it is a holy **duty** and the **calling** of every Christian to participate in political life so that **there also** God's law and justice may prevail, and **there also** obedience to God and God's Word can be shown.

The [white] Dutch Reformed Church [DRC] professes this in its report *Ras, Volk en Nasie in die lig van die Heilige Skrif* ("Race, People and Nation in the Light of the Holy Gospel"). The report states plainly that the church in its proclamation must appeal to its members to apply the principles of the kingdom of God in the social and political sphere. When the Word demands it, the church must fulfil its prophetic function with regard to the state in spite of popular opinion. The witness of the church with regard to the government is a part of its essential being, says the report. The Dutch Reformed Church professes this because it wants to be Reformed. Why then is this profession, and participation, not granted to other Christians (and other Reformed Christians)?

There is still another problem.

Through its spokespeople your government has often warned that clergy "must keep out of politics". Yet at the same time it is your own colleagues in the cabinet who want to involve those of us who serve in the churches in political dialogue!

The only conclusion which I can come to is that you do not object in principle to the participation of clergy in politics - as long as it happens **on your terms**. This seems to me to be a standpoint which is neither tenable nor honest. In addition, are you not denying your own history by holding on to this view? Did not [Boer] clergy speak as leaders of their people, and did they not inspire their people in their struggle? Did not the church of the [Boers], even in the Anglo-Boer War, stand right in the middle of the struggle? Why do you today reject with a sort of political pietism that which yesterday and the day before you embraced with thankfulness to God?

But, Mr Minister, there is something more in your warning. It has to do with the exceptionally difficult and sensitive issue of a Christian's obedience to the government.

It is important that you understand clearly that **I made my call for civil disobedience as a *Christian* to other *Christians*.**

It surprises me that some people see in this a call for violence. It is precisely an alternative to violence! I look to this alternative because I still do not believe that the way of violence is the proper way.

Or is it the fear that when Christians “obey God more than man”, the whole **idolized nature of this state** will be exposed? Surely the state in which Christ reigns (as you claim he does) shouldn't have to be afraid of this? In addition, I am of the opinion that I have done nothing more than to place myself squarely within the Reformed tradition.

Essential to all of this is the following:

It is my conviction that, for a Christian, obedience to the state or any authority is always linked to the obedience to God. That is to say, obedience to human institutions is always relative. The human institutions can never have the same authority as God, and human laws must always be subordinate to the Word of God. This is how the Christian understands it. **Since God does not expect blind obedience** from God's children, **Christians cannot even think of giving unconditional obedience to a worldly sovereignty.**

Over the years it has become clear to me that your government expects precisely that sort of unconditional, blind obedience. I want to be honest with you: this I cannot give you. The believer in Christ has not only the right, but also the responsibility, to be more obedient to God and God's law than to the government, should the government deviate from God's law.

Through the years, nearly all the large Christian churches in South Africa have condemned the policy of your government as **sinful and wrong**. My own church, the D.R. Mission Church, last year condemned the policy of this government as being “**in conflict with the gospel**” of Jesus Christ, a policy which cannot stand up to the demands of the gospel”. I heartily endorse this statement of my church. Your policy is **unjust**, it denies people their basic human rights, and it undermines their humanity. Too many of the laws which you make are in conflict with the Word of God.

Your policy and its execution are a tremendous obstacle for reconciliation between the people of South Africa. Some of the laws are more hurtful than others and have been condemned especially by the churches. Now the churches have reached a point where we say: If we condemn laws on the grounds of God's Word, **how can we** then obey those **very same** laws?

In my view, Christians in South Africa today do not stand alone in this decision. **The scriptures** know of disobedience to powers when these powers disregarded the Word of the Living God.

Daniel's three friends **refused to obey** the king's law when they refused to bow down before the graven image of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 3:16-18). They regarded the king's laws as being in conflict with the instructions of their God.

Peter's **refusal to obey** the Sanhedrin's command, not to witness about Jesus any more, is the classic example of disobedience to a worldly authority. To this day

his answer resounds in the church of Christ: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

This, despite the fact that in the case of Peter and John the Sanhedrin was the highest authority, not only in religious matters but in everything which did not lie directly under the jurisdiction of the Roman procurator.

There are still other examples. Paul displayed nothing of a servile obedience when the magistrate at Philippi wanted to release him from prison after confining him unlawfully (without a trial!). "They gave us a public flogging, though we are Roman citizens and have not been found guilty; they threw us into prison, and are they now to smuggle us out privately? No indeed!" (Acts 16:37).

In the case of Paul, the judges were the highest officials in the Roman colony of Philippi. For both Peter and Paul it was clear that occasions could arise when the only way out would be disobedience to the unjust authority. Still more of these examples: Luke 23:6-12, Mark 15:1-5 and John 18:8-11 teach us that Jesus did not always demonstrate obedience to state authority. Before Herod, he refused to say a word: "He answered him without a word." Also before Pilate, according to Mark, Jesus gave no answer, either to the question of Pilate, or to the charges of the high priest.

John tells us that Jesus reminded Pilate of something which every worldly bearer of authority must be reminded [of]: "You would have no authority at all over me if it had not been granted you from above; and therefore the deeper guilt lies with the man who handed me over to you" (John 19:11).

I am not saying that these actions of Jesus or Peter and Paul "prove" that a revolutionary overthrow of the state can be justified. That is a completely different issue. I am saying here that blind obedience to civil authorities is alien to the Bible and that, for a Christian, loyalty and obedience are first and foremost to God.

May I point out in parenthesis, that the issue on which everything hinges and which South Africa has to learn is certainly not servile submissiveness of citizens to the state but *co-responsibility* for the affairs of state. And it is precisely this which the policy of your government denies millions of citizens.

This is not the place to present a full explanation on Romans 13. However, I would point out that the first verse of Romans 13, which is often taken as a blank legitimization of state interference, is in fact a very serious point of criticism. A government yields authority because (and as long as) it reflects the authority of God: liberating, creative, serving. Thus Paul can refer to a government as a servant of God "for your good". Thus, throughout the years, it has been taken for granted in the Reformed thinking that a government wields authority for as long as there is evidence that it is accepting responsibility for law and for justice. Where justice is lacking, however, the government's authority is not longer derived from God but is in conflict with God. In such a case, resistance against such a government is justified and becomes a duty.

Even Augustine, one of the fathers of the church who was particularly concerned about protecting the state and defended state authority with extraordinary energy, had this to say: "Justice is the only thing that can give worldly power worth. What is a worldly government if justice is lacking? It is none other than a bunch of plunderers."

Calvin also saw this and he held that "Worldly princes" lose all their power when they rise up against God; he stated clearly that Christians should resist such a power rather than obey it.

The point is of course to decide when a government collides with the demands of God's Word. In this the church should be led by the Word itself through the justice of the kingdom of God, and also by the actual experience of people. Because it is in the concrete situation of people, that the Word shows itself alive and more powerful, and "sharper than any two-edged sword".

In this the church should find its criteria; not from those who are favoured by the laws, but rather from those who are hurt by these laws. Hurt at their deepest level of being; those who have no voice, the voteless, the vulnerable ones; the oppressed, the "least of these my brethren".

And with the least of the brethren in our country, your government and your policy stand condemned. I don't have to repeat the accusations again. I just want to draw your attention to the fact.

The sufferings of men, women and children, the wounds caused by your policy through the years can never be compensated for by "concessions". The superficial adjustments already made by your government do not touch the root of the matter. It is as one of your own colleagues has said: "The fact that a black man carries a springbok-emblem doesn't give him political rights." Indeed. We can add: it doesn't give him his God-given humanity either.

It is because of your policy that so many churches and so many Christians find themselves against you. In this we really have no choice, because the church of Christ in South Africa must obey God more than people. I plead with you: stop your disastrous policy before it's too late.

May I end with a personal word? I am not writing this letter in order to prove myself brave or because of arrogance. I must honestly confess that I am afraid of you. You are the Minister of Justice. You have at your disposal powers which only a fool would underestimate. The victims of this power are sown across the path of South Africa's past and recent history.

I, like any other South African, want to live a normal life with my wife and children. I want to serve the church without fear. I want a country where freedom is seen as the right of every citizen and not as a gift from the government. I want, along with millions of other people, to have co-responsibility in my native-country, with everything you grant yourself and your children. I also want peace, but real peace. Not the fearful silence which we have now, but that peace which is the fruit of active justice for all.

But my wish for a “normal life” must not undermine the service I am called to. That would be intolerable. And my service is **also towards you**. That is why I write this letter. **I shall stand guilty before God if I do not witness against this government.**

I think the time has come for your government to make a choice between the servant of God in Romans 13 and the **demon in Revelations 13**. And unless the right choice becomes evident through a whole-hearted and fundamental change of your policy, Christians in South Africa will have to continue to resist you as we would the beast of Revelation 13.

I am aware that resistance against a government is not an easy decision to make. That is why the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church made it so clear last year: “If a Christian finds himself bound by his conscience to follow the way of criticism which brings himself into conflict with the state, then he should **obey God** more than men. In this case, however, he must **be prepared** to accept suffering in the spirit of Christ and his apostles.”

Once again, this is not a matter of being brave. Rather I would like to use the occasion seriously to urge you to realize that peace and salvation and a happy future for South Africa do not lie in more “security laws” or in more threats or in an ever-growing defence-budget. Rather they lie in the pursuit of **justice for all** South Africa’s children ...

I am using this letter as an open-witness and thus will make it available to the press.

I thank you for giving me your time. May God give you wisdom in all things.

Yours sincerely,

Dr A.A. Boesak.

Transcription (with own emphases and [explanatory notes]) for Study-purposes:

[iNgxoxo/Symposion: KAIROS 2012](#)
[iThuba-Nhlahla eMzansi-Afrika](#)
[Seminar KAIROS](#)

07.06.2012