

At the Apocalypse

The South African Church Claims Its Hope

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALLAN BOESAK

—
At right:
Following a
funeral service
in Middleburg,
young people
carry Allan
Boesak high on
their shoulders.

You have said that you received a great deal of nurture from your family, your home, and your church. How did these lay a foundation for you in your early years?

Jim Wallis:

Allan Boesak: The family is the basis of all, I think. I was 7 years old when my father died. That was too soon, I thought. I still think so. After that my mother took the responsibility in almost every way.

Also the church has always played a very important role. I was very lucky to be the second youngest of eight children in a home where we had daily Bible readings and

prayer. And we got to really know the Bible, and we would talk about the biblical stories and the meaning of faith.

We have always believed that the Bible is a basic source of strength and comfort for the whole family. And when you're really poor, then the biblical story is not just another story. When it is applied to your life, often in the very powerful way that it was in our lives, it becomes very, very meaningful; in fact, one of the very few meaningful things in your life.

When I was 10 years old, I joined the Association for Christian Students, which also nurtured me. I remember going to "beach missions" during our summer holiday. We had church services for the kids in the morning, and in the evening we had services for everyone in big, big tents.

One morning the woman who was supposed to do the children's service didn't appear. And Chris Wessels, a school teacher who had quite a formative influence on my life, said, "Let Allan tell them a story and give his testimony."

I don't think anybody took it too seriously when I got up in the pulpit, which we built from sand. But I told people how I came to

love the Lord. I cannot remember any specific date or angelic visitation or anything like that. But I just remember growing up and learning to love the Lord in a way that, even at that stage, I knew I would not want to give up—ever.

And they loved it. So day after day, I gave my testimony. I guess part of my love for preaching came from those times.

So this was your first sermon, at the age of 10?

No, it wasn't my first sermon. I preached before that—but to captive audiences. When I was 4 or 5, I would make some of my sisters sit down with their dolls and I would preach. When I would go to church with my family, my mother says I would cry if I couldn't take the biggest hymnbook, the Bible, and two other books because I saw the minister coming into the pulpit with these books. And that's what I wanted to be like.

From my mother I learned that the widow and the fatherless are in the special care of God. She believed that passionately. If it were not so, there wouldn't be so many stories about how God made that promise come true in the Bible.

So when today I say, "It is true; God is the God of the poor and the widow and the fatherless—and he does call them to stand where he stands, namely for justice and against injustice," people say, "Oooh, that's liberation theology." And I say, "That's fine. It may be liberation theology; but that's what I learned at home."

I've heard a story about your mother and how she put this sense of God protecting the widow and the orphaned and the poor into action at one point. Tell us that story.

After my father died, we bought this very old and delapidated house. We spent weekends trying to patch up this old house.

My mother bought bricks from a builder, who was a fairly well-off man. When he delivered the bricks, she counted them. Instead of the 400 she had paid for, he had given her only about 250.

So she called him up and said, "You did not give me all the bricks. Where are the rest?"

He said, "Don't bother me with this. I know that my men delivered all the bricks."

He was a man, he was rich, he was powerful, so he just told her. And she told him, "I will never forget this. But that's okay, you don't

Allan Boesak, president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and moderator of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa, was interviewed in his home outside Cape Town.



have to worry about the bricks. The God I believe in is the protector of the widow and the fatherless. And somehow you're going to know that." Then she put the phone down, and said, "All right, let's work with the bricks we've got. And maybe then we will have to save a little more and buy some more bricks."

A week or two later, this man came up to the house and delivered the rest of the bricks. "What happened?" my mother asked.

"Well," he said, "something did happen." He was building houses and one or two of them had mysteriously caught on fire. And he interpreted this as a sign from heaven.

He didn't say much. He must have been incredibly embarrassed, and a little bit fearful, I think, of my mother. She is very small, not an impressive person, and not educated at all; she only went to elementary school. She was a seamstress and at that stage worked for 3 rands and 50 cents [about \$2] a week.

But I saw all this, at age 12, and it made a tremendous impression on me because I saw that in a very tangible way, God does take care of the poor and the meek and the lowly and the oppressed. That was something I was never to forget for the rest of my life.

So today I am literally impassioned about these things. I keep on telling people that this is the biblical message and that it doesn't matter what the situation looks like; God will make true the promises that he has made. And there is no doubt in my mind that he will.

Education was very important for you. You did well. And you began to encounter obstacles as your mind and heart carried you further.

Education was very important. That was just about the only thing my mother always said they could not take away from me.

When I got to seminary, however, I began to get the feeling that what I received there was not good enough. The theology training course was five years—and at the end of it, your highest diploma was still your high school diploma. There was no degree, no specific academic acknowledgment, and you would not be recognized by any academic institution.

We were the so-called—and I hate these terms, but one has to use them—colored folk of the Dutch Reformed Church. And we had been kicked out of the white church. Our professors were not academics or teachers. They were all white and steeped in the theology of the white Dutch Reformed Church where justification of apartheid came as naturally to them as drinking water.

When we pleaded to be allowed to take correspondence courses through the University of South Africa, where we could study for a degree, they refused. Their reasoning was, "You don't need this kind of study. If there is any academic study to be done, it will be done by people of the white church."

One professor said, "You cannot include things like Greek and Hebrew in your curriculum because at Stellenbosch University the students fail like flies. And if the white students have difficulties,

what in the world do you think you would do? You are just not capable of doing that kind of study."

I remember that I was never so enraged as at that moment. I remember also vowing to myself that I would not accept this. I would prove him wrong no matter what it took.

In 1965 James McCord, president of Princeton Seminary, and my immediate predecessor as president of the World Alliance [of Reformed Churches], came to South Africa. He was invited by the white church, but they squeezed in one little lecture at our seminary. I asked him a few questions.

After the lecture he called me up, and he said, "Young man, I like the way you phrased those questions." We talked a little bit and he said, "How would you like a scholarship to Princeton?" I almost flipped. I said, "Sure!"

One professor went with me to the board of professors to discuss the scholarship, and they told him, "Forget it." What made the board particularly angry is that, at that time, Princeton had a requirement that if a student from a Third World church came to study at Princeton, his church must send a letter stating that this training will help equip this person for a position of leadership in the church.

But the board members were so scared of that sentence. They didn't intend to have any black leadership at all. So that sentence, even more than the specter of my coming back with some academic degree, frightened them.

In the same way, a scholarship to Hamburg University had to be turned down. In 1968 I was ordained, and in '69 I began to look for places to study. In 1970, at the invitation of Beyers Naudé at the Christian Institute, Professor Johannes Verkuyl from Holland came to South Africa and preached in my church. He said, "My goodness, you really should come and study in Holland."

Despite great difficulties, I decided to go. When I wrote my seminary and asked them for a letter of recommendation, they refused me even that. I went out of this country with my wife and my 6-week-old baby. We had to sell everything we had in the house and borrow money.

But we went without a cent from this church, without a word of encouragement, without a letter of recommendation. In fact, in the last telephone conversation I had with one professor, he told me, "You can go to Holland. But I'm telling you, your future in this church is over. You are finished."

But I had my vow. I came back.

I returned in 1976, and we had our next synod in 1978. I challenged one white minister who pontificated about the impossibility of church unity.

He quoted a text in Isaiah that says, "They who believe shall not hasten." His interpretation of the text was that if we believe in church unity, that's fine, but we must not be in too much of a hurry.

I got up and said, "Do you know that the same word that has been translated in that Isaiah passage as 'shall not hasten' can also be translated 'shall not run away'? And we shall also not run away from this challenge." I told him, "If you go back and check your Hebrew, you will see that I am right."

And the elders spontaneously applauded and came to me and said, "Oh, it's so wonderful to see one of our own people." Here was someone out of their own midst, from a little place in the North-western Cape—which would be like rural Alabama in the United States—and that is why they were so proud.

And that is why the white *Dutch Reformed Church Journal*, after my election in '82, wrote, "The most bitter pill to swallow is that this man, this little brown man, with his degree from Holland and his Dutch accent, is now the president of the World Alliance for the Reformed Church." And when I saw that, I thought, "Oh, this is all right. We actually have them where we want them. They can't stand it."

So I made true my vow. And what was even more important was that I opened the door for others to get training.

How has the church evolved into its current role?

My church had never said anything meaningful about apartheid, never condemned it. In 1978 we did for the first time. Once that was said, everything was placed in focus: the role of the white church; the role of the white so-called missionaries in our church; the role of the acquiescent, older black ministers; the role of the younger generation.

It was such a pleasure to preach to congregations, to write, and to simply show how the Bible was being distorted and abused by the white church and by the white missionaries in our church to suit the apartheid ideology. It was a marvelous thing to see how the eyes of the church opened up. In the synod of '78 we just said, "Apartheid is a sin."



By 1982 we talked about the secular gospel of apartheid. And, on the basis of that, we accused the white Dutch Reformed Church of heresy and announced the *status confessionis* [state of confession], and called for repentance.

"*Status confessionis*" is a term that was used by the World Alliance and has been adopted by our church. Certainly for Christians in the Reformed tradition, we believe that there comes a time in history when a situation becomes more than a political argument.

Because of the bankrupt political situation apartheid brings, and the immense suffering it brings, it is a political situation. But there is more at stake. Apartheid, after all, was first conceived of in the church. And the church was used as the model for the state. Apartheid is seen and defended as a Christian policy that expressed the will of God for this country.

The people who created and maintain this policy all call themselves Christians. Moreover, they stand in the same Reformed tradition that we do. What we are uncovering here is more than a political fallacy; it is a distortion of the gospel of Jesus Christ, something that has poisoned the body of Christ in its essence in this country.

For us, of course, it's extremely painful because apartheid began in the Dutch Reformed Church in the 19th century and was implemented first around the table of the Lord when white Christians said, "We can take anything, but we will no longer drink with these slaves and former slaves out of one cup and share the one bread in the one church."

So this moment, when we express the unity of the body of Christ in the death of Jesus and the love that God has for us, has become the issue on which racism is based in the Dutch Reformed Church.

Our struggle is one for the integrity of the gospel and of the very life of the church itself. It is a moment of faith, a moment of confession. We are placed in a state of confession over against this false gospel, this blasphemous plague.

When a church speaks like this—and we were the first in this country to do so—it goes beyond any other statement. In a sense, once you have said this, then all other statements about apartheid become superfluous. You must now act on the basis of this confession. And it is out of that background that we became the first church in the Dutch Reformed tradition of Holland and this country, in almost 400 years, to add a new confession to the three traditional ones. And that was the Confession of Belhar.

I think, for the Dutch Reformed Church, it was a moment of rebirth. If we fail the Lord now, on this point, and if we now bow down to the forces of threat and intimidation, and if we accept now the evil of apartheid, we would be far more guilty in the eyes of God than the white Dutch Reformed Church could ever be. All of the

major churches in this country accepted the heresy declaration. This pushed the churches further into the struggle.

So this constant claim that what is being done here is being done in the name of Jesus Christ, I think, could and should be seen as the basis for the state-church conflict in South Africa, because we have to say two things. We have to say that this system cannot be called Christian. That's blasphemy. We have to resist it. And we have to say, "Jesus Christ is Lord," over against the government that even in those days began to make absolute, totalitarian claims and expected the churches to accept it very quietly.

Then things escalated, because after '83 the United Democratic Front (UDF) began. The churches were confronted with the challenge that the people in the pews would go out and join the UDF and fully participate in marches. We had said as churches in 1979 that we must engage in acts of civil disobedience as an act of obedience to God. But the only people who were willing to do that were the people in the United Democratic Front.

So there was a serious gap between what the church said and believed and what we were actually able or willing to do. We were scared in the churches. Church leaders were not ready then.

Then came the attack on the South African Council of Churches, and we had to be very clear where we stood and how we were going to take up this challenge from the South African government. Then in 1985 came the state of emergency, and the churches became the only safe places where people could meet.

At that stage, again, the church leaders did not take a very active, overtly political role. The churches did make their buildings available for meetings, until it became clear that the government didn't care if meetings were in churches or not.

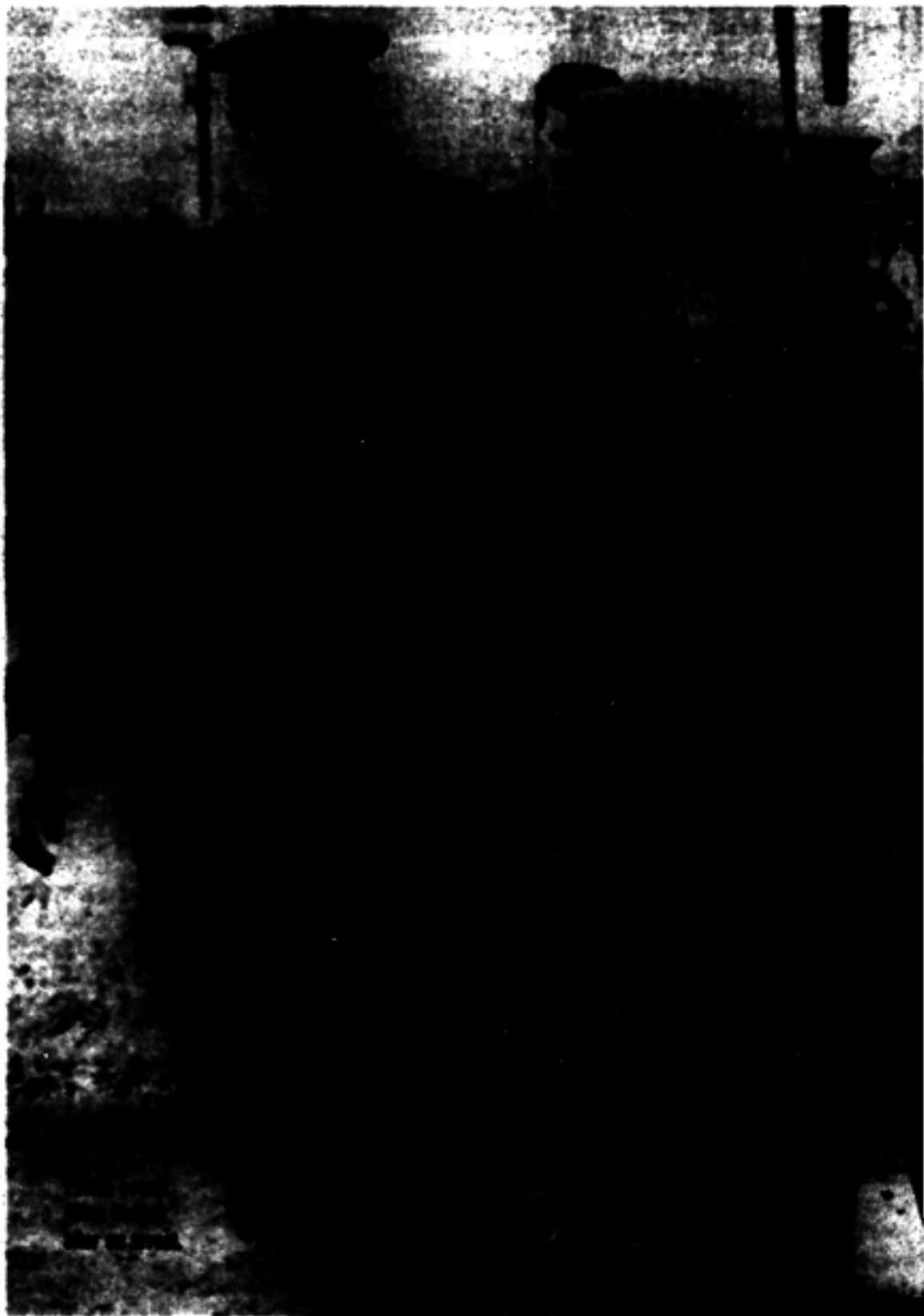
You have heard about people being arrested in church while we were in a prayer meeting for detainees. And how they came one time and arrested the whole congregation—fathers, mothers, children, babies—everybody. How they shot tear gas into churches, including my own.

And how our candlelight services were declared a threat to the security of the state; even the burning of a candle was seen to be subversive. But when we asked the church leaders to join us in 1985 in a nonviolent march, none of them came.

Now, in 1988, all of the political organizations have been banned. And before we were really ready, the churches were catapulted to the front line. There we were, in the trenches, unprepared as we were. Unprepared because, in spite of all those statements, we were never really serious about getting into the business of resisting the government. In spite of saying apartheid is a heresy, many of the church leaders and many of the churches were still not ready to say the government is illegitimate.

St. Augustine was right when he said, "A government without justice is little more than a gang of bandits." I think this is what we are facing in this country. And in 1988, all of a sudden, things are happening. I have never seen such unanimity among the church leaders. I have never seen such resolve. They came together the day we heard the organizations were banned.

What happened as a result of the banning of the organizations?



On Wednesday, February 24, when we heard the news, we said we had to have a meeting because this is very serious. Archbishop Tutu and I had a press conference that same day and decided to call Frank Chikane and ask whether he would call a meeting of church leaders. He did.

The church leaders then decided, "Yes, we will come to Cape Town. On Monday we will have a church service in the cathedral and we will march." They came together for the first time, more than 25 church leaders, 500 clergy. It was beautiful.

And I had said, "You know, I realize that there are some of you who will not have everybody with you in your church. All of us may be in that position; but some of you have many white members who may be far more angry at you than my black members who disagree with me would ever be. So we will understand if you will not participate." But they came.

And after they were hosed down and had been arrested, we got together for the press conference, and they said, "We will do this again. We have to do this again." I haven't seen anything like that.

Things escalated after that. The newspapers attacked us. The government attacked us. The Dutch Reformed Church attacked us.

singling out Bishop Tutu, Frank Chikane, and myself. The church leaders responded, saying, "You're not only talking about them." The Anglican church responded. My church committee responded. Canterbury sent an envoy. The World Council of Churches sent messages. We still get messages from churches all over the world every day. My own presbytery responded, pledging support and further action.

And the thing has just escalated further. P.W. Botha has now threatened to take action against us. They have tried to isolate us from the rest of the churches. But that will also prove to be futile.

So we are into a very different phase now. Since 1985 the government has been trying to draw the bottom line. And every time there's a new bottom line.

The state of emergency was a bottom line for them. Thousands of people have been in jail at one time. Hundreds of our people are being killed.

After two years the government must have thought, "By now we would have been able to break the back of the democratic opposition." And much to their surprise, they found out that the opposition was still there. Very much still there.

Then they decided to ban the organizations. And then the churches stepped in. And now they have to act against the churches, so it's a new bottom line.

This shows the utter desperation of the government, and the strength and the resilience of the movement. I think now is a very decisive phase.

What is happening here reminds me of 1933 to '34 in Germany. Hitler wanted a Nazi church. All he wanted was an apolitical, acquiescent church that would not challenge the government. A church that would not raise its voice when the trade unions were hit, when the communists were singled out, when the Jews were persecuted. And that's the kind of church Hitler got.

And so I am not surprised when I hear [Moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church] Johan Heyns say, "I'm not defending the government, all I'm saying is that Boesak and Tutu must accept the authority of the government." All they want from us is to be silent.

That is what this modern Hitler in South Africa is getting from the white Dutch Reformed Church. The choices the church is facing in this country are exactly the same choices that the churches in Germany faced. And that is why it is important that not only individuals stand up and be counted, but that the church as the church stand up and speak.

In Germany, Hitler won because the institutions of the people succumbed. The church as an institution succumbed. The Niemöellers, the Bonhoeffers, and the Karl Barths, Hitler could handle. Say they're not part of the church. Isolate Bonhoeffer and hang him. Isolate Niemöeller and throw him in jail. Isolate Karl Barth and send him back to Switzerland. That he could do because the church as the body of Christ did not move. And here we must not let that happen.

The South African government is saying, "Boesak, Tutu, and Chikane are the problems. They are political. They are communists, or at least supportive of communist, atheist, violent revolution. They are not the real church." How are the churches at the grassroots responding to that charge?

I'm actually not worried at all. I think the churches are very clear where we are and where we should be. I don't think the people would allow them to isolate us. But they don't understand that, because the white church of which P.W. Botha is a member doesn't know anymore what it is to be the church.

The white Dutch Reformed Church rests upon their power—the power over the media, the access their leaders have to the press. Our statements explaining that their attacks on us are wrong don't even get published. Behind them is the full and absolute power of the South African government, the strongest economic and military

power of the continent, with powerful connections in Washington, London, Bonn, and Paris. So when Heyns stands up to speak in the white Dutch Reformed Church, that is his basis.

When I stand up, there is no access to the media here to explain to my people. There is no power of propaganda, no guns, no powerful armies or governments or laws behind me. All I have, literally, is the Word of God that tells me about the promises of this God, the story that I have carried in my heart from childhood on. And I have the faith of the people in front of me because that is all they have, too.

The white Dutch Reformed Church has faith in power. They don't have faith in the suffering Jesus Christ who came into this world. His clothes were gambled away. His identification with the poor and the meek and the lowly came to that point on the cross. How can they identify with him? How can they understand him? How can they hear him?

And that is why it is impossible for the white Dutch Reformed Church to say with us that simple text from the Bible: "You have to be more obedient to God than to human beings." Because if they say that, they have to sever their relationship with this government. And they can't.

Even while we know the situation is so grim that you can step outside and be arrested, and that your pastor can be thrown in jail or worse in the coming week, we can still come together with a joy that is almost indescribable. That experience P.W. Botha and the others don't know anything about. And so that is why it doesn't mean a thing when they say we do not represent the church. Because they do not understand what it means to be the church.

Tell us about your own experience in these past weeks. There have been very specific, threatening attacks directed at your home, your office, your family, your own life.

Yes. We've had these threats before. But the situation in the country was different then.

Years ago I had an experience. This white man came to my door, and he said, "I have been in prayer and fasting for a week or two now. God told me about what a danger you are to this country. He also told me that you would have to die and I would be your executioner if you don't stop this."

That was the first time I had been faced physically with something like that. I remember just standing there trembling. I didn't even say anything back to him. I just closed the door and leaned against it. And my son Allan, then 2 years old, came running up the passage. As I hugged him, I understood for the first time, I think, what I was doing to my family.

I was completely shaken up. And I found that I had to pray out loud. I couldn't just say the words in my heart, because I was afraid that if I didn't hear the words, I wouldn't be able to keep them. I had to hear myself say it, so that I could be held accountable.

Now death squads are something that we've become used to. Friends have been murdered quite cold-bloodedly. I said to the church, "You ought to know there have been threats. You ought to know also that I'm not a particularly brave person. But I do feel that what we're doing is the call of the gospel."

I'm not being callous in terms of my family. But I cannot change now. I cannot give up now. I understand my political engagement to be at the very heart of my discipleship.

I said to my church, "I have no other weapon but the will of God. And that will remain so. If I die, it will not be because I wanted a bloody revolution. Revolution, yes. Radical change in this country, yes. But it will not be because I wanted to kill people. It will not be because I called upon anybody to hate P.W. Botha or the police or any white person, for that matter. It will be because I have tried to stand up for justice. I have tried to be true and faithful to Jesus Christ in this situation."

In our country you must not say, "Why me?" Rather, the time has come for us to say, "Why not me?" And I'm not morbid about this. I have come to peace with it. I have faced guns and the police



numerous times. I have preached in a church literally with a policeman standing next to me holding a gun to my head.

Oh, I would love to live a little longer. I enjoy life immensely. I enjoy my music. I enjoy my friends, I enjoy my family. I live with a zest that I don't want to give up. But I also know, again to quote Martin King, it is very, very true: "There are some things so dear and so precious and so eternally true that they are worth dying for. And if you are not willing to die for those things, then you are really not fit to live." Only people who know that they might have to die for something that is indeed eternally true and precious, I think, know how to live.

What is a greater joy than to work for justice, to seek peace, to stand up for things that are worthwhile? To plead for the fatherless, the widow, and the poor, to take up their cause and fight for it, and to work for the realization of the kingdom of God. What is greater joy than that?

Even with these threats, I would say that there is more life and joy and love and just taking simple pleasure—with life and each other—in this house than most houses I've been in.

Yes. Whatever happens, these are the moments the children are going to remember the most. The atmosphere is what they're going to remember. I've often said that if you're afraid, then you die a thousand times before you die. And I wouldn't want my children to die little deaths every day of their lives.

You cannot really prepare anybody for what might happen, certainly not your children. I still find it extremely difficult to talk to them about what they need to know. But they need to understand

what their father is about. They cannot only see the crowds who love me. They must also see those who hate me, and they must understand why.

I think they do understand. And yet Allan Jr. is doing handstands all over the house, and there are soccer games and tennis matches and dance classes. All of this is going on in the midst of this intense political situation with all the threats.

This is sustenance, you know. It must be like that. If I didn't have this, and the church, I guarantee I wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing right now. So in a sense P.W. might have more understanding than people would give him credit for. If he could actually separate me from the church and from my family, then they know they wouldn't even have to kill me. I would just wither away and die. They know that. The wonderful thing is, they can't do that. It's impossible.

As the churches have taken on this unprecedented role, the government has been very publicly responsive. How do you perceive the government's response? And what is the role of the Dutch Reformed Church?

I believe that the government was taken totally by surprise by the churches' action. They did not ever think the churches would come together and take on the government as we did. And frankly speaking, I must admit I was a little surprised, too.

The government realized immediately that if you tackle the churches, this is a totally new ball game. This is not simply protest against the government or resistance to evil, although it is that. It is a question for us, finally, and ultimately, of obedience to God. I don't think the government thought that it would come to this.

Then the Dutch Reformed Church reacts with the government and says, "Tutu and Boesak claim that they are the church, but they are not the church." Then they go one step further. They claim to be the true church. It is preposterous.

This is an old trick, of course. Whenever the state wants to move against an institution, an organization, or people who have links with the church, then the state accuses us of not really being Christian. That accusation is almost always followed by some statement by the white Dutch Reformed Church saying, "Yes, indeed, those people are not Christians, they are not the church. They do not represent anybody. They are merely politicians using the gospel." This opens the way for the state to act against such people.

As most of those cabinet ministers and government people enter white Dutch Reformed Churches across the country on Sunday morning, they are being told, "Whatever you have done between Monday and Saturday, you have done because God wants it." It is the perfect role of the false prophets of the court in the Old Testament.

But there may come a time, and maybe the time is now, that someone will have to ask the question, Can you be church in this country and also be what the Dutch Reformed Church is? I think this is probably the next step, not simply in terms of the confrontation between the state and the church, but the confrontation between the church and the church in this country.

How do you see this church-state and church-church conflict evolving?

All I can see is that we are only at the beginning of the conflict. There will be much more confrontation between the state and the church, and between us and the white Dutch Reformed Church.

Out of this will crystallize the true nature of the South African government. It will quite openly become less and less the servant of God from Romans 13, and more and more the beast from Revelation 13.

As the church challenges this beast and as the confrontation grows, and as the testimony to the Lordship of Jesus Christ becomes more and more and more costly, many in the church will deny the Lord rather than stand up in the face of persecution. Many will find solace in acquiescence. Many will run into a kind of neutral ground, not understanding there is no neutral ground anymore.

We have arrived at the time of the apocalypse. Either you are willing to testify with the prophet on an abandoned, isolated island, or you give in to the powers of destruction and are lured away by those who can buy you off.

The church in South Africa is facing a new phase of persecution. What we have seen over the last few years will intensify—pastors being thrown in jail, hundreds of Christians going to jail, church services being broken up with guns and dogs and tear gas, and whole congregations being arrested. As the end draws near for this government, and as white people genuinely begin to realize that the days of white domination are just about over, I think their sense of desperation and panic will grow. And there will be for us, as the persecution increases, the temptation to become more and more like the oppressor.

The government is trying to force upon us the only options that are at this moment open to them. They are trying to close down all options for us and make us believe that we are just like them in that respect—that we only have two options: either to accept apartheid for what it is and resign ourselves to it, or to opt for violence, because that's what they have done.

They resign themselves to apartheid, and say, "We will defend this position with all of the violence we can muster." They don't have any other choice. Apartheid will not exist for one minute without the awesome violence that is needed to maintain the system. And I think they are trying to get the churches to believe that that is what is left for us as well.

I have been pleading to our people, and to the church in particular, let us not succumb to this temptation to believe that these are the only options open to us. It seems to me now, more than ever before, it is incumbent upon us to carve out new possibilities, because without these possibilities this country will not survive.

This government is bent not only on the destruction of this country, but it is bent on the destruction of our whole future. It cannot even understand dreams of justice and equality and human dignity and humanity. Those things are already beyond their grasp.

The only people who have that dream in their hearts and can keep it alive are the oppressed. It is the duty of the church to see to it that that dream is kept alive. Those ideals that people have been dying for in this country for so long will be the foundation upon which the new South Africa will be built.

Because all avenues of nonviolent protest have been shut down, because the government is so incredibly violent and brutal, I fear also for the brutalization of the soul of our people. We will become just like them if we're not careful.

I have understanding for people who, in their desperation, look for violent solutions to the problem. And I will not judge them. I have been in this situation for too long. We all have been knee-deep in blood. And I have seen the incredible cruelty of the people who run this country.

There is a very basic human response to this: revenge. People will say, "The only language they understand is the language of violence." But if you choose violence from a strategic point of view, you make it so easy for them, because violence is just about the only thing they know how to do well.

But also our very soul is at stake. We will be destroyed. We would come out victorious in the end, some people argue, because we are so many—no white government can kill 30 million black people. But even if we survive, even if we reach the other side of this battle through that necessary river of blood, what will be at the other end of it?

All through history I see that people who build their future on violence find it hard to understand that there are any other true

solutions. At the simplest provocation, they fall back onto the solution of violence.

And only years later do we begin to understand that violence really does not give any solutions at all. It may change a situation, but it does not really transform it. It may destroy the present structure, but it so often also destroys the foundations that are necessary to build a new society.

More and more I've come to understand that Gandhi and Martin and Jesus were right. You don't have to be judgmental about the desperation of oppressed people reaching for a gun, but I will continue to warn my people. We are in danger of losing our souls. We are jeopardizing our future. We are selling out our humanity for a quick victory. We are changing the pain of today for a much deeper malady of tomorrow.

We must try to find ways and means of breaking the cycle of violence. But people who want to talk like that must be willing to wade into that river of blood and fight alongside others without weapons that will kill. They must be willing to take upon themselves the burden of the oppressed in a very real way and to die for the sake of others.

If you're not willing to do that, if you're not willing to take the suffering upon yourself, you must not shun those who are in the midst of the violence. You have to actually go into the battlefield itself and there give your testimony.

I am always a little irritated when people say, "Yes, but you must be willing to dirty your hands in the struggle." It doesn't mean that you dirty your hands only with another's blood that you have spilled. You can also dirty

your hands while you take care of the wounded and while you bleed yourself because you are unwilling to hurt or kill another person.

If ever there was a situation to speak of a just revolution, South Africa at this point is it. And it's only when you can make that acknowledgment that you really begin to understand the need for the church to plead for and work for and initiate true, authentic nonviolent resistance.

The more I see the violence, the more I understand the need for breaking the cycle of violence in South Africa. I am more committed to the struggle now than ever before. I'm also more committed to nonviolent action and a nonviolent lifestyle, to try to preserve what is best and noble for our country.

I don't think my leadership is dependent upon the degree to which I'm willing to embrace violence. That's not the way we work. White people, Western people, whose whole history is one of violence and threat and intimidation, may think that way. In the United States, people's whole security, their happiness, depends on having those stockpiles of nuclear weapons to secure, as they say, their "way of life."

I think it is ridiculous apart from being blasphemous. I think it's a sick, cruel joke. If my happiness and my security were to depend on weapons of destruction and the ability of my president to press a button that would destroy God's creation 53 times over, I wouldn't sleep one wink.

Many people think you are a leader if you are willing either to lead in violence or accommodate people's natural fears and tendency toward revenge. I'm turning this around. I'm saying to people, "The more you put your faith in violence, the more hopeless and



helpless you become."

Just look at white people in this country. They have the best-equipped army on the continent. They also have something else that is necessary to make a good soldier: They are cold-blooded, and they will kill you without thinking twice. And they are rich. But they don't know what it means to have peace of mind. They don't know such a thing as security.

I pity them, because while I don't have their weapons, money, or power, I have peace of mind in the sense that I know that the promises of God are so secure that they can never fail. And I'm willing to take a lot for the sake of this, because I happen to think that if our people would make these values the basis on which we stand, then we will last.

Tell me about the future of South Africa.

In the short run, it's going to be very grim; there's no doubt about that. I think we have to be very sober when we talk about this. There is an evolving white panic that is extremely dangerous and will destroy this country.

It is also extremely dangerous to the region. No one in close range of these people is safe, neither our people in the townships, nor the people in Mozambique, or Zimbabwe, Angola, or Namibia.

White people are desperate. They've lost everything. They know that, in spite of the assurances of the white Dutch Reformed Church, there is no morality left; there is no justification left. They know that they've lost it, and so all they have is the whiteness of their skin and their willingness to use the violence they have at their disposal.

People who are losing their power and their privileges can do strange things. Over the next year or so, you'll see more of what is already taking place: the disintegration of white politics, the disintegration of Afrikanerdom as we have known it over the last decade, and a totally mindless violent bent that will come over this country.

I think that the historian was right when he said, "If you look all over history you'll see that the totalitarian and dictatorial and violent regimes don't decline; they tend to collapse." And I think we're heading for such collapse here. There are too many factors at work in South Africa at the moment.

But I am astounded by the resilience of the oppressed people in this country. Under normal circumstances, the government would have expected that by now there would be no opposition left. And I think under normal circumstances they would have been right. But South Africa's oppressed people—and most of us are Christians—find resources at a depth that the people who rule this country don't even know about.

After two years of a state of emergency, everybody knows that if you go to a church service, for example a service to pray for detainees, you literally take your life in your hands. All the police need to do is to turn a church service into a riot. Then they shut out the world, and they can do what they will. No newspaper will be able to say what happened and who did what to whom. That's the law. But still the people come.

The police and government actually get nervous when you go to jail en masse. One of the rules is that you may not sing. It's a great joy for our people to go into jail and start singing. Oppressed people who can sing must be subversive to any oppressive power. And for our people to experience this in worship as well as on the streets, in the struggle, in political rallies, is a sign of hope that is one of the strongest things that we've got.

One of the reasons why people keep on singing is because of tradition, but another is because we are more certain of our victory than they can ever be of their endurance. There is no doubt about it.

Some people think you can only believe the victory will come if you know that you're going to be part of it, that you'll actually see it. But your faith in the victory of goodness doesn't have to be tied to your actual participation in that victory. It doesn't matter to me whether I will see it or not. That does not change the truth one iota—that the victory will be there and we will have it. □