

Allan Boesak, Black + Reformed (1984)

### Chapter III

#### **Divine Obedience: A Letter to the Minister of Justice**

*The South African Council of Churches (SACC) convened in St. Peter's Church in Hammanskraal, South Africa, in July 1979. The theme of this meeting was "The Church and the Alternative Society." For Allan Boesak's keynote address at the meeting, see chapter 2 in this book. The SACC adopted a resolution in which Christians were encouraged to engage in acts of civil disobedience relative to the apartheid laws. This resolution was not related directly to Dr. Boesak's presentation, although his address does, of course, provide a theological rationale for civil disobedience. Minister Schabusi responded to this resolution with a warning in which he stated that the South African government was becoming impatient with such statements as the SACC resolution because they "posed a threat to the stability of South African society." In response to the warning of Minister Schabusi, Dr. Boesak wrote the letter that is the text of this chapter.*

This open letter appeared first, in Afrikaans, in *Dewbreek*, Oct./Nov. 1979, pp. 6-8. An abridged English translation appeared in *One World* 50 (Oct. 1979) 9-10; a similar, abridged English translation appeared in *Christianity and Crisis* 39 (Nov. 26, 1979) 298-300. This chapter presents the author's own translation of the unabridged letter to the minister of justice of the Republic of South Africa, Alwyn Schabusi.

August 24, 1979

The Honourable A. Schlebusch  
Minister of Justice  
Union Buildings  
Pretoria

Dear Sir,

A short while ago you thought it your duty to address the South African Council of Churches, as well as church leaders, very sharply and seriously over radio and television and in the press in connection with the SACC resolution on civil disobedience. Although the resolution was not taken as a direct result of my address, I did express my point of view openly on that occasion and I am one of those who support the SACC in this respect.

You are the minister of justice and it is in this capacity that you have issued your serious warning. I take your words seriously. Hence my reaction, which I express to you respectfully and which I ask you to read as a personal declaration of faith.

Your warning has become almost routine in South Africa: the government continually says to pastors and churches that they must keep themselves "out of politics" and confine themselves to their "proper task": the preaching of the gospel.

However, on this very point an extremely important question emerges: What is the gospel of Jesus Christ that the churches have been called to preach? Surely it is the message of the salvation of God that has come to all peoples in Jesus Christ. It is the proclamation of the kingdom of God and of the lordship of Jesus Christ. But this salvation is the liberation, the making whole, of the *whole person*. It is not something meant for the "inner life," the soul, only. It is meant for the whole of human existence. This Jesus who is proclaimed by the church was certainly not a spiritual being with spiritual qualities estranged from the realities of our human existence. No, he was the Word become flesh, who took on complete human form, and his message of liberation is meant for persons in their *full humanity*.

Besides, the fact that the term "kingdom" is such a political term must already say a great deal to us. For example, this fact

brought Reformed Christians to believe (and rightly so) and profess with conviction throughout the centuries that this lordship of Jesus Christ applies to all spheres of life. There is not one inch of life that is not claimed by the lordship of Jesus Christ. This includes the political, social, and economic spheres. The Lord rules over all these spheres, and the church and the Christian proclaim his sovereignty in all these spheres. Surely it is the holy duty and the calling of every Christian to participate in politics 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 Dutch Reformed Church professes this in its report "Race Relations in the South African Situation in the Light of Scripture." The report states plainly that in its proclamation the church must appeal to its members to apply the principles of the kingdom of God in the social and political sphere. When the word of God demands it, the church is compelled to fulfill its prophetic function vis-à-vis the state *even in spite of popular opinion*. The witness of the church with regard to the government is a part of its essential being in the world, says the report. This is sound Reformed thinking, and the Dutch Reformed Church accepts this because it wants to be Reformed. Why, then, are you refusing to grant other churches and Christians (also other Reformed Christians!) this witness and participation?

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

The only conclusion that I can come to is that you do not really object in principle to the participation of the clergy in politics—as long as it happens on *your* terms and within the framework of *your* policy. This seems to me to be neither tenable nor honest. In addition, are you not denying your own history by holding to this viewpoint? Did not the Afrikaner clergy speak as leaders of their people, and did they not inspire their people in what you saw as a just struggle? Did not the churches of the Afrikaner, even in the Anglo-Boer War, stand right in the midst of the struggle? Why, then, do you reject today with a sort of political pietism that

which yesterday and the day before you accepted and embraced with thankfulness to God?

But, Mr. Minister, there is even more in your warning, which I cannot ignore. It has to do with the exceptionally difficult and sensitive issue of the Christian's obedience to the government.

It is important that you understand clearly that I have made my call for civil disobedience as a Christian, and that I was addressing the church. The context and basis of my call may thus not be alienated from my convictions as a Christian addressing other Christians upon that same basis.

It surprises me that some have tried to interpret this as a call for wanton violence. It is precisely an *alternative* to violence! And I turn to this alternative because I still find it difficult to accept violence as an unobjectionable solution. Or perhaps there are some who fear that should Christians in South Africa perform their duty in being more obedient to God than to humans, the idolized nature of this state will be exposed. Surely a state that accepts the supreme rule of Christ should not have to be afraid of this?

I believe I have done nothing more than to place myself squarely within the Reformed tradition as that tradition has always understood sacred scripture on these matters.

Essential to this is the following: It is my conviction that, for a Christian, obedience to the state or any earthly authority is always linked to our obedience to God. That is to say, obedience to human institutions (and to human beings) is always relative. The human institution 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. Even God does not expect blind servility; Christians cannot even think of giving unconditional obedience to a government.

Our past experience has taught us that this is exactly the kind of obedience, blind and unquestioning, that your government expects. I want, however, to be honest with you: this I cannot give you. The believer in Christ not only has the right, but also the responsibility, should a government deviate from God's law, to be more obedient to God than to the government. The question is not really whether Christians have the courage to disobey the gov-

ernment, but whether we have the courage to set aside God's word and not obey *God*.

Over the years, nearly all the Christian churches in this country have condemned the policies of your government as wrong and sinful. My own church, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, last year at its synod condemned apartheid as being "in conflict with the gospel of Jesus Christ," a policy that cannot stand up to the demands of the gospel. I heartily endorse this stand my church has taken. Your policy is unjust; it denies persons their basic human rights, and it undermines their God-given human dignity. Too many of the laws you make are blatantly in conflict with the word of God.

I have no doubt that your policies, and their execution, are a tremendous obstacle to reconciliation between the peoples of South Africa. There are laws that are most hurtful, or more draconian than others, and these especially have been condemned by the churches. Now the churches have reached a point where we have to say: If we condemn laws on the grounds of the word of God, how can we obey those laws?

In my view, Christians in South Africa today do not stand alone in this decision. Scripture knows of disobedience to earthly powers when these powers disregarded the Word of the living God. Daniel disobeyed the king's law when he refused to bow down before the graven image of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 3: 17-18), because he regarded the king's law as being in conflict with the demands of his God. Peter's refusal to obey the commands of the Sanhedrin not to give witness to Jesus has always been the classic example of disobedience to a worldly authority. To this day his answer still resounds like a bell in the church of Christ: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). There are other examples. Paul displayed nothing of a servile obedience when the magistrates of Philippi wanted to release him from prison after having confined 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 Peter and John, the Sanhedrin was the highest authority, not only in religious matters, but in everything that did

not lie directly in the sphere of the Roman procurator. In the case of Paul, the magistrates were the highest officials in the Roman colony of Philippi. For both Peter and Paul it was clear that occasions could arise where disobedience to unjust authority was the only honorable way for the Christian.

Furthermore, Luke 23:6-12, Mark 15:1-5, and John 18:8-11 teach us that Jesus himself did not always demonstrate obedience to state authority. Before Herod, on one occasion, "he answered him not a word." Also before Pilate there were those moments when he chose to give reply neither to the questions of Pilate, nor to the charges of the high priests and scribes. John tells us something else of great significance. He tells us that Jesus reminded Pilate of something that every bearer of authority must remember or be reminded of: " 'You would have no authority over me at all,' Jesus replied, 'if it had not been granted you from above' " (John 19:11).

I am not arguing that there is "proof" from these actions of Jesus, Peter, and Paul that violent, revolutionary overthrow of a government is justifiable. That is a completely different issue. I am saying, rather, that blind obedience to civil authorities is alien to the Bible; and that, for the Christian, loyalty and obedience to God are first and foremost. May I also point out, parenthetically, that the issue on which everything hinges, and the lesson that South Africa has to learn, is that what is needed is *not* servile submissiveness of citizens to the state, but *rightful co-responsibility* for the affairs of the state? And this is precisely what your policy denies millions of South Africans.

This is not the place to present a full treatment of Romans 13. However, I would simply point out that the first verse of Romans 13, which is often taken as unconditional legitimization of a government's contention that its authority can never be challenged by Christians, is in fact a very serious criticism of that very authority. A government wields authority because, and as long as, it reflects the authority of God. And the power of God is a liberating, creative, serving power. Thus Paul can refer to civil authority as "a servant of God [*diakonos!*] for your good." Thus, throughout the years, it has been taken for granted in Reformed thinking that a government has authority as long as there is evidence

that it accepts responsibility for justice, for what is right.

Put another way, the definition of government in Romans 13 does not simply point out that civil authority exists. It also suggests that there is proper authority only where there is a clear distinction between good and evil, so that it is not only important whether a government is "Christian" or not, but really whether it is still truly *government*—that is, understands the difference between good and evil. Where there is no justice and no understanding, the authority of the government is no longer derived from God, but is in conflict with God. Resistance to such a government is both demanded and justified.

Even Augustine, one of the respected fathers of the church, who was concerned particularly with protecting the state and who defended political authority with extraordinary energy, had this to say: "Justice is the only thing that can give worth to a worldly power. What is worldly government if justice is lacking? It is nothing other than a bunch of plunderers."

Calvin echoed this sentiment when he wrote to King Francis in the letter published as the prologue to his *Institutes*: "For where the glory of God is not made the end of the government, it is not a legitimate sovereignty, but a usurpation." And Calvin added, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." Calvin also stated clearly that "worldly princes" lose all their power when they rise up against God. Christians should resist such a power, not obey it.

When, precisely, do the actions of a government collide with the demands of the word of God? In deciding this, the church should be led by the word itself, knowing the demands for justice and peace, and also by the actual experience of the people. It is in the concrete situations of actual human experience that the word of God shows itself alive and more powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword.

In making this decision, the church should look for criteria not among those who make the laws and who have political and economic power, nor among those who are favored by unjust laws, but rather among those who are disadvantaged by these laws, who are hurt at the deepest level of their being: those who suffer, those who have no voice—the oppressed, the "least of

these my brethren." And in the eyes of the least of the brethren in our country, your government and your policies stand condemned. I need not repeat these accusations; I simply want to draw your attention to them, and to the truth that is in them.

The untold suffering of men, women, and children, the bitterness of too many, the wounds caused by your policy through the years can never be forgotten, nor compensated for by the "concessions" your government is apparently willing to make. The superficial adjustments to apartheid already initiated do not touch the root of the matter. It is as one of your colleagues has said: "The fact that a black man is allowed to wear a *Springbok* emblem (as he participates in multiracial sports) does not give him political rights." Indeed, and we may add: it does not give him his God-given humanity either.

You complain that the churches are "against the government." But it is because of your policies 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 rather than you. I plead with you: stop your disastrous policies.

May I end with a personal word? I am not writing this letter in order to be brave or arrogant. I must honestly confess that I am afraid of you. You are the minister of justice. As such, you have at your disposal awesome powers such as only a fool would underestimate. The victims of these powers are sown across the path of the past and recent history of South Africa.

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 to be given or withheld by the government. I want, along with millions of our people, to have co-responsibility for government in our native land, with everything you want for yourself and your children. I, too, want peace, but authentic peace, which is the fruit of active justice for all. However, my longing for a "normal" life must not undermine the service to which God has called me. That would be intolerable. And my service is also to you. That is why I write this letter. I shall surely



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: you are either the "servant of God" of Romans 13, or you are the "beast from the abyss" of Revelation 13. Unless and until the right choice becomes *evident* (through the wholehearted and fundamental change of your policy), Christians in South Africa shall be called upon, *for the sake of their faith*, to resist you as we would the beast of Revelation 13. For the Christian, obedience to God and God's word must be the first priority.

I am aware that the decision to resist the forces of government cannot be an easy one. That is why the synod of the D. R. Mission Church made this so clear last year: "If a Christian is bound by his conscience to follow the way of criticism, which brings him into conflict with the state, then he should obey God more than humans. 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 should like to use this occasion to urge you to realize that peace and salvation, indeed, the future of South Africa, do not lie in more "security laws," in more threats, or in an ever growing defense budget. They lie, rather, in the recognition of the human dignity of all South Africans, in the pursuit of justice, and in respect for the God-given rights of all.

You as whites are not in a position to achieve this on your own. That is why the churches have pleaded for a national convention where the people could be represented by authentic, chosen leadership. We demand the right to have the vote, so that our citizenship in South Africa may become meaningful. Give us the right to express ourselves and our political will. We need to have the opportunity to participate fully and meaningfully in the political processes in South Africa. Is this not the fundamental thing you grant yourself?

I plead that you make use of the offer and the opportunity to have discussions. Honest negotiations with the intention genuinely to share together in South Africa is always better than to stand against each other as enemies.

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 everything.

Sincerely,  
Allan Boesak