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C.P.S.A. Bishops' statement on civil disobedience -  
November 1986.

# Knocking unjust laws is only alternative

Seek  
February  
1987

Conscientious defiance of unjust laws may be the only alternative to violence and the taking up of arms by those who are attempting to establish a just order.

This was the view expressed by bishops of the Church of the Province of Southern Africa at their synod meeting in November last year.

The following is a full text of their statement:

1. Christian obedience is owed supremely to God, the Creator and sovereign Lord of the Universe. He exercises His authority in love, compassion and justice. He gives responsibility to people to act as His stewards over the rest of creation, accountable ultimately only to Him.

In the Old Testament the absolute standards of faith and conduct are expressed through His gift of Torah. The word "Torah" is not well translated by the English word "law". Rather it describes the covenant relationship between God and His people, and His demands on them. Torah expresses God's grace and man's response, summed up in the Ten Commandments. Torah finds its full and perfect expression in Jesus. He enables and commands His people to exercise their responsibility to all with God's love, compassion and justice. When we call Jesus "Lord", we accept His absolute authority over creation, and over every aspect of life and society. (Phil 2:9-11).

2. "Laws", "the State" or "Law and Order" are not of themselves absolutes to be accepted at all cost and above all else; nor should they be elevated to the status of a God in whose name obedience is demanded. They can have only a relative or derived authority. Jesus clearly stated this in His dialogue with Pilate (Jn 19:11a) as Paul did in Romans 13. Just laws give expression to God's law and so advance His Kingdom; unjust laws cause division, alienation and eventual chaos.

## GOD'S LAW

3. The conduct of any government and the laws it makes are to be judged in the light of God's Law. The duty of discerning and expressing God's will in any particular context is the task of the Christian community. Part of the witness of Torah in Old Testament times was the demand that rulers ruled justly under God in a society which reflected His righteousness and compassion.

Psalms 72 calls for a just and compassionate king; Elijah challenged Ahab over Naboth (1 Kings 21), Nathan challenged David over Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12), and several of the other prophets confronted the authorities of the day (Amos, Jeremiah 22). It was in

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# Christian believers should disobey all the unjust laws

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this tradition that Jesus bore witness in His words recorded in Luke 4:16-21, in His challenges to Herod, Pilate, and the Jewish rulers, and in His emphasis on justice and compassion (Matt 25:31-46; Luke 16:19-31). Today's Church must do likewise.

In normal circumstances Christians' obedience to civil law can be part of their submission to the Law of God as summed up in the words and life of Jesus Christ. Christians' disobedience to civil law is legitimate if it is genuinely part of their submission to the higher Law of God. "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Many Christians in South Africa believe that a number of laws in this country which entrench apartheid cannot be obeyed because they contradict the teaching of the Gospel.

Laws such as The Population Registration Act (Race classification), and the Group Areas Act are in fundamental contradiction of Christian teaching. The denial of basic freedoms such as those of assembly, speech, access to information, and the practice of detention without trial are an affront to human dignity as affirmed by the Gospel. Laws which interfere with religious freedom and the freedom to worship are intolerable in a country whose constitution claims to be made "in humble submission to Almighty God".

## OBLIGATORY

In Christian tradition defiance of such laws (sometimes known as "civil disobedience") has been widely considered justifiable, and in some cases obligatory.

In the early church, writers insisted that Christians could not obey laws which entailed disobedience to Christ. This was at first especially applicable to emperor-worship (eg: Tertullian) and to the actions of heretics or infidels (eg: Ambrose epp 41 and 51). By the time of Thomas Aquinas a wider definition was accepted,

by which Christians were not obliged to obey laws contrary to the general welfare. In the Reformation period and on through church history to the present, Christian thinkers have continued to qualify carefully the obedience due to the secular power.

Conscientious defiance of unjust laws may be the only alternative to violence and the taking up of arms by those who are attempting to establish a just order.

We are aware that many are wrestling with these issues. We therefore commend the following guidelines to Christians who believe that their witness to the truth of the Gospel and obedience to God may demand disobedience to the law of the land.

## CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

1. Law is essential to the ordering of human society.
2. Where a particular law is disobeyed it should be with a view to restoring just laws.
3. All such witness through civil disobedience should only be undertaken after serious prayer and thought.
4. A decision to act in this way should normally be taken individually only after consultation with other Christians.
5. The law may be disobeyed only by those who are prepared to suffer the consequence of their actions.
6. Only with a clear appreciation of what is involved, and with love towards all who think differently, may the law be disobeyed.
7. All who contemplate breaking the law in Christian witness must carefully examine their conscience with regard to their motives, and avoid any desire for personal martyrdom.
8. Aims and objectives must be carefully defined. Possible alternative ways by which the same objectives may be lawfully attained must be considered.
9. All participants in such actions must be fully informed about

the objectives, the plan and the discipline of non-violent action and the possible consequences.

10. As far as possible, a public explanation for this kind of witness should be given.

11. The individual's conscience must be respected. People may not be coerced or manipulated into any act against their will.

12. Great care must be taken to avoid violence and injury to bystanders and to other non-participants.

We commend for prayerful consideration the implications of our Lord's summary of the Commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength... You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Mark 12:30-31).

The summary of the Commandments is reiterated by St Paul in Romans 13:8-10; this passage immediately follows St Paul's well-known call to obey the Law of the Land in Romans 13:1-7. The call to obedience to the Law needs, therefore, to be seen in the context of the greater law, to love one's neighbour, and it is clear that the obedience to the Law of the Land which St Paul calls for should be consistent with the overall command to love one's neighbour; in certain circumstances civil disobedience may more effectively express that love. "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

## PASTORAL SUPPORT

It is on these Biblical grounds that the Bishops of the CPSA feel bound to give their pastoral support to Christians who believe that they are called, in obedience to Christ, to disobey unjust laws, in terms of the above guidelines and in the spirit of the Gospel.

We recognise that in the circumstances of our time this may be a truly Christian and non-violent way of working for a more just society, and of fulfilling our calling to be makers of God's peace in our land.

# Find each other as sisters and brothers in Christ

C.P.S.A. Pastoral letter from the Bishops November 1986 — Seal, February 1987.

WE, the Bishops of the CPSA, are very conscious of the distress and perplexity of members of our Church, black and white, whose children are caught up in the turmoil of our times.

There are those whose sons are called upon to serve in the SADF. Others have children who have left the country, either to avoid such service, or to wait until a better order is found for the land. There are others whose children have left in order to take part in "the armed struggle". All these, parents and children, are beloved members of God's family to whom we are concerned to minister in the love of Christ.

In a normal society a Defence Force may be considered to have a legitimate place in order to protect against foreign aggression or malicious insurrection.

In most civilised societies some persons find such military service unacceptable in conscience. These are usually termed pacifists or conscientious objectors and provision is made for reasonable alternative service. Christian tradition acknowledges that it is right to allow people to follow conscience even where a majority believes that conscience to be in error.

The pain and perplexity in South Africa arise from the fact that in the eyes of the majority of the governed, the Government lacks legitimacy. The socio-political and economic system which has been established is seen to be unjust and oppressive. In their experience black people, and especially youth, have increasingly come to realise the human damage caused by the systematic denial of proper education to them. The legal restraints upon their participation in the "free enterprise" system and the generally unequal life oppor-

tunities available to them have come to be seen as hostile and provocative. For these reasons the SADF is seen as defending an unjust order.

In a normal society stability and order are capable of restoration, but in an unjust one, police or military action is perceived as oppressive and so fuels the cycle of violence. Many young people (with or without support from their parents) are therefore in Christian conscience seeking other options for serving their country than in the SADF.

We condemn violence from whatever source. The Church upholds the sanctity of human life. Jesus said: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44). State sponsored brutality and brutal reaction to it are both intolerable. Bombings, necklacings, shootings, sjambokkings, teargassing and torture are all horrible. We must recognise that until the inhumanity of injustice is removed, such inhuman things will continue.

## MORE INTENSE

By use of the Defence Force in the townships, South African is turned against South African. On the border too it is not a foreign enemy who invades. The pain is still more intense for Namibians, who see the presence of the SADF as a mark of illegal occupation. Fellow Christians face each other across the guns.

There are many, who believe that the SADF is essentially defending apartheid. Others believe that the SADF is defending South Africa against communism. We are convinced that the proper

defence against any system which devalues the worth and God-given dignity of each person, is the propagation and practice of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ within a just society. Dehumanizing political systems are less likely to find followers in a society which is justly ordered.

We call on you, the people of God, of every race and background, to come together and find each other as sisters and brothers in Christ.

Understandable white fears, fuelled by guilt and propaganda, can be greatly eased by encountering the warmth and humanity of the black community expressed in *ubuntu* (humanness, compassion, sharing, togetherness and reverence for human life). Blacks gripped by fury need to be recalled to these very roots.

In view of this, the Church has to be concerned for people with varied needs and differing attitudes conscientiously held.

The Church is bound to help guide her members in the formation of conscience. This may involve the uncomfortable challenge posed by the demands of the Gospel.

With this in mind the Church must minister to all in the love of Christ:

- To those who agonise over their Christian responsibility in the face of military call-up.
- To those who decide to serve in the SADF.
- To those who in Christian conscience seek other ways of national service, or who refuse to serve at all.
- To children who have left the country.
- To those affected by the experience of military service, imprisonment or exile.
- To the parents of all these groups, who sometimes cannot understand their children's decisions or who may be unable to trace their whereabouts.
- To all those who are confused and damaged by the present turmoil.

This search to minister to all these different groups presents many complex problems, in spite of which the Church tries to do all that it can to provide adequate pastoral care for its members.

We pray for you, and ask you to hold together in the love of Christ even where there are grave differences in thinking about the way forward into that peace and justice which we all seek by the grace of Christ our only Saviour.

**Collection Number: AG1977**

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**PUBLISHER:**

*Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive*

*Location:- Johannesburg*

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