

In the Heart of the Conflict: Jacques Ellul and Christian Mission

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All that I have already written will be useless unless it is understood as a call to arms, showing what enemy we have to confront, what warfare we have to wage, what weapons we have to use. Then, in the heart of this conflict, the Word can be proclaimed, but nowhere else.

The Presence of the Kingdom, p.116

French intellectual, Christian anarchist, scourge of technological dreamers and political ideologues, Kierkegaardian critic of Christendom, bleak commentator on contemporary social trends... Jacques Ellul was all of these things, but he may not be an obvious choice as a resource for missional preaching.

This is, after all the man whom Alvin Toffler, author of *Future Shock*, described as a “future-hater” and “technophobe,” and who was characterized by theologian Harvey Cox as a dour, misanthropic Calvinist with “a flabby doctrine of grace” which cuts the nerve of responsible Christian involvement in the world. (See Cox, *The Seduction of the Spirit*, 1974 pp.69ff.)

It is surely because of attitudes such as these that Jacques Ellul is so little studied or referred to in theological circles today. But these attitudes are based on shallow and antagonistic readings of Ellul’s work. Anyone who takes the time to read him seriously — and charitably — will discover a subtle Christian thinker with much to offer at the end of the twentieth century by way of biblical insight, cultural analysis, and impetus to mission.

Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) was a prolific writer, the author of close to fifty books and a thousand articles. Not all of these are works of theology. Ellul had an incredible range of interests, and he made a significant contribution in other fields, notably sociology and the history of institutions. I, for one, could not begin to try and summarize his thinking in all of these different areas, and even in his theological writings there are many different themes and ideas to be explored.

But I do believe that there is a remarkable and deeply moving coherence to Ellul’s work over the course of his long and productive life, and that this is due precisely to his profound sense of calling and Christian mission. His writings — both theological and non-theological — are aimed at forging a new understanding of the world and creating a distinctively Christian style of life which allows the Word of God to become present to the contemporary world.

In my own life I have found Ellul’s writings to be of immense inspiration and encouragement, not primarily in preparing for preaching — at the moment this is not one of my regular tasks — but more importantly in struggling with the opportunities and lunacies of a ‘secular’ career. What I find so helpful about him is that he takes the life of lay people with the utmost seriousness — not something that can be said of all theologians and preachers. Ellul places the emphasis in mission not on grand gestures of “the church,” but on the real conflicts experienced by Christian people as they live

out their calling in the world.

One of Ellul's earliest books, and perhaps his most important, is *The Presence of the Kingdom*, published in 1948. William Stringfellow — in his foreword to the 1967 edition which was reprinted in the 1989 edition published by Helmers & Howard — described it as Ellul's "most astonishing book...an authentically prophetic work," and I agree with him. It is one of my most treasured possessions, all the more precious because I came across it quite by accident in a secondhand bookstore when I was a student, and bought it for 30 pence (about 45 cents). For me it is one of the great Christian books of our times. All of the major themes that are developed and dealt with at length in Ellul's later works are addressed in *The Presence of the Kingdom* in brilliant and — even now, fifty years later — utterly fresh and relevant fashion: the burgeoning power of technology, propaganda and communications, politics and the state.

Sometimes in his succeeding books Ellul deals with these topics from an exclusively sociological point of view — as in *The Technological Society* (1964), *Propaganda* (1965), and *The Political Illusion* (1967); sometimes he explores them from a theological perspective, as in *The Meaning of the City* (1970), *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (1972), and *The Humiliation of the Word* (1985). But in *The Presence of the Kingdom* Ellul explicitly relates them all to what is clearly his central and overriding concern: how Christians are to live and bear authentic witness to Jesus Christ in the midst of these massive realities of the modern world, realities which seem to enclose us all — believer and non-believer alike — in their suffocating and deadly embrace.

The biblical passage that stands at the heart of Ellul's thinking is Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Ellul discovered this text as a young Christian academic starting out on his life's work, and it became for him "a guide," "a compass," "an intellectual tool." It was a constant reminder to him that a Christian's first love and loyalty must always be for God, and never for "this present age." The imperative, "Do not be conformed..." flows from the primary command to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, and with all our souls, and with all our might.

But what are the characteristic features of this age? What are the conformities which the Christian has a duty to disobey? What are the structures by which these conformities operate, the powers that they have to squeeze even the followers of Christ into the world's mold?

These are the questions that Ellul set out to answer in *The Presence of the Kingdom*, and which he continued to address in both his 'secular' and theological writings for the rest of his life. In fact, the whole of his career can be seen as an attempt to understand and describe the strategies of conformity that are at work in our world, strategies which, in his view, are essentially totalitarian in nature, and that lead to enslavement and death, even — and especially — in the heart of Western culture. As far as Ellul was concerned, Christians who do not also struggle with these questions are simply not taking their commitment to Jesus Christ seriously. To be a Christian is to be a non-conformist.

When Ellul began his inquiry into the contemporary structures of conformity, he was deeply influenced by the thought of Karl Marx. Indeed, although he reserved some

of his fiercest criticisms for Marxist ideas and movements, he readily acknowledged the German thinker as a continuing influence upon him throughout his life. (Ellul talks about his relationship to Marx in *Perspectives On Our Age*, 1981, and *Jesus and Marx*, 1989). Karl Marx, he explained, instilled a “revolutionary tendency” in him, and taught him to take human history seriously; for “Marx assigns major importance to the concrete material reality that surrounds us.” He strips away the surface of human action and unmask the world, showing the deeper interests and motivations that are at work.

And so Ellul asked himself, “If Marx lived [today] what would he consider the fundamental element of society, what would he choose as the basis for his study?” He came to the conclusion that it would not be capitalism, the defining feature of nineteenth century European society, but what he called ‘technique.’ The technical phenomenon is *the* characteristic, the main preoccupation of our times, in Ellul’s opinion, and there is no area of life that escapes it.

For Ellul, technique is much more than the technological hardware of our world. As he made clear in his ground-breaking sociological study, *The Technological Society*, it is a mentality, a way of thinking and acting that both produces machines and is imposed on human beings by machines.

Technique is the translation into action of humanity’s concern “to master things by means of reason.” It concerns itself with finding the most rational way, the most efficient method, the best possible means of doing things. Technique dominates everything, including, and especially, those aspects of life that we deem least susceptible to the influence of technology — personal growth and development, sexual relationships, religion.

Technique, Ellul maintains, “is nothing more than means and the ensemble of means.” Ours is “first and foremost a civilisation of means,” and the reality of life in this civilization is that means are more important than ends.

Ellul had already developed this idea in an important chapter of *The Presence of the Kingdom*. Everything today, he claims, has become means: “There is no longer an ‘end’; we do not know whither we are going. We have forgotten our collective ends.” And in the absence of any great collective purpose to guide and control this ensemble of means, technique becomes self-justifying and takes on a life of its own: “it functions absolutely like a machine, without any external value to trouble the good order of the flywheels or the pistons.” The machine tells us what to do; it limits our options and points only to courses of action that suit its smooth functioning. Technique, therefore, imposes itself with totalitarian force on the people who created it and imagine that they still control it.

This, for Ellul, is the fundamental contradiction of contemporary culture. Our scientific genius and technical brilliance, exercised with such a sense of autonomy and pride, have led us into new and previously unheard of forms of captivity. While freedom and liberation may be constantly invoked in our culture, it is actually necessity which characterizes the technical universe. “Everything must accommodate itself to it with mechanical certainty.”

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Ellul goes on to argue that this totalitarian impulse, this necessity, is further strengthened by humanity’s desire to give technique a sacred status. Magic, he

maintains, was one of the first forms of technique: it sought to subordinate the gods to human beings, just as modern scientific technique seeks to control nature: “Our modern worship of technique derives from man’s ancestral worship of the mysterious and marvellous character of his own handiwork.” In the technical universe, means are not allowed to remain mere means — “the thing does not remain a thing” — they have to be invested with ultimate value, ascribed to the fundamental order of reality. And so, far from banishing the sacred, technique makes great use of it. In our supposedly secular society there has, in fact been a massive process of sacralization, affecting such phenomena as political causes, scientific procedures and theories, industrial processes, sex, media, advertising, and consumption. (Ellul develops his thinking about this at length in *The New Demons*, 1975.)

Technique derives from the worship of our own handiwork.

Behind the modern forms of technique and our contemporary obsession with means, behind the totalitarian forces of conformity and the cultural will to suicide, it is clear that for Ellul, is an age-old reality that has not disappeared: idolatry.

Ellul explores the biblical notion of idolatry most thoroughly in *The Humiliation of the Word*, but it is a recurring theme throughout his work. Idolatry, in his view, is integrally connected with covetousness, the central sin of humanity. He believes that the prohibition against covetousness is the last of the ten commandments because it summarizes all the others: Adam and Eve’s reaching out to grasp divine power is the action which lies at the root of the human problem. Idols are thus a symbol of our covetousness, a celebration of our power at the expense of God.

But idolatry, according to Ellul, is surrounded by irony — and tragedy. “Claiming to be wise they became fools....” It is essentially ironic because while posing as the ultimate expression of mastery and freedom, idolatry actually bears witness to human impotence and slavery. It is tragic because it delivers human beings into the hands of the powers of conformity and death.

It is here, at the intersection of his sociological and theological analysis of conformity, that I believe Jacques Ellul still has an enormous amount to say to those who want to take Christian mission seriously.

Much has been written in recent years about the need for the churches of the West to enter into a renewed missionary encounter with their own culture. A great debt is owed, at this point, to the late, and sadly missed, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, for it was he who, almost single-handedly, put this issue on the agenda of the mainline churches, encouraging them to view the West as a mission field and to consider what form a missionary engagement with it should take.

But for various reasons, not least of which was Lesslie Newbigin’s own powerful analysis of the problems of Western culture and the focus he gave to the debate, the discussion has tended to focus on the philosophical ideas and assumptions that have led to the decline of religion as an intellectual force today. It is philosophy, the world of ideas, that is seen as the source of both the church and society’s problems and as the most pressing challenge to Christian mission.

Ellul, while certainly not discounting philosophy altogether, places far more emphasis on the material and social factors that shape belief and action. As far as he is concerned, it is these concrete, material realities, and not the philosophy that is taught in the universities, that pose the primary challenge to Christian faith and

existence today. In this sense, volts and semi-conductors are far more of a problem than Voltaire and Sartre.

But Ellul certainly has no time for purely materialist analyses and solutions, and here he parts company decisively with Marx and the Marxists, and possibly with many liberal Christians, too. He believes that behind the concrete material realities of our culture are profound spiritual forces that trap, enslave, and destroy human beings. Christians who truly wish to follow their Master discover that they are “not confronted by the material forces of the world but by its spiritual reality.” They wrestle not against flesh and blood but against “the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness.” As people who have been set free from the powers of death by the grace of Jesus Christ they are charged with a task that no one else can fulfill: they are called to fight against these spiritual realities and “to break the fatality which hangs over the world.”

At the heart of Ellul’s thinking, then, is a real theology of mission, which is concerned above all else to free the captives, to set at liberty those who are oppressed. And conflict is central to his understanding of mission. It is a call to arms. This is not a conflict with other religions or philosophies or ideological groups with whom we disagree. We wrestle not against flesh and blood....Mission, for Ellul, can never be simply a question of philosophical debate, of establishing the intellectual credibility of faith, or of appealing to the innate good sense of the cultured despisers of religion. Mission is a spiritual struggle and conflict with the principalities and powers, the very forces that shape our world and continue to exert immense pressure on Christian people.

What may look like purely sociological forces turn out to be huge conformities through which the Prince of this World does his work of destroying human beings. And so this battle must be waged appropriately with spiritual weapons. Prayer is utterly central to Ellul’s understanding of Christian existence, basic to his notion of a secret revolution that may, by the grace of God, take place at the heart of the world. He has a great deal to say about this in *The Presence of the Kingdom*, and other books like *Prayer and Modern Man* (1970), and *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (1973). These are rich, provocative resources.

Ellul’s emphasis on prayer must not be misunderstood. He was certainly not in favor of an unengaged piety, where prayer is an excuse for inaction. Christians do — and must — live in the midst of the conformities and idolatries of the world and they must wrestle with them as free people. They are not to pretend that these realities do not exist, or that it is possible to live somehow apart from them, or that the world can be somehow changed by magically ‘Christian’ solutions. But they are to believe, to hope, that in the heart of the conflict a word may be spoken and heard that changes everything.

Jacques Ellul is one of the toughest critics of human culture whom I have come across. His analysis can seem doom-laden and depressing to many people, hardly a tonic for the jaded congregation on a Sunday morning. But I believe that he accurately describes the pressures and forces that bear down upon us in contemporary culture; and he understands that if we are not to be defeated by them we must put on the whole armor of God. His bleak analysis of social realities must be seen in the light of his faith in Jesus Christ, God’s intervention in the course of human history, the one possibility of life and freedom in the face of the world’s deadly conformity.

In one of the last books that he ever wrote — *What I Believe*, 1989 — Ellul declared that because of Christ, “the game is not over” — a different way of life can be created in this closed-off world of ours. The transcendent God is “the Creator of something new within the technological system,” and because of this “an opening is always possible.” That new thing to which Ellul bore powerful witness is hope.