

Jacques Ellul's View of Scripture

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JACQUES ELLUL'S VIEW OF SCRIPTURE

David W. Gill*

By almost any standard Jacques Ellul, the recently retired professor of history and sociology at the University of Bordeaux, must be regarded as one of the most important Christian intellectuals of this century. He is best known of course for his sociological analysis of the technological society. Simultaneous with his career as sociologist and historian, Ellul has been an active lay theologian and ethicist. In fact, taken by itself Ellul's work in theology and ethics is equaled by only a handful of contemporary authors when judged in terms of productivity, creativity and influence.¹

The staying power of Ellul's work in theology and ethics remains to be seen. However, the fact that Ellul resists anything smacking of "trendiness" or accommodation to various spirits of this age and that his work is rooted in and guided by Biblical revelation augurs well for his future continuing importance.

At the opening of *To Will and To Do: An Ethical Research for Christians*, Ellul says that in his work

the criterion of my thought is the biblical revelation, the content of my thought is the biblical revelation, the point of departure is supplied by the biblical revelation, the method is the dialectic in accordance with which the biblical revelation is given to us, and the purpose is a search for the significance of the biblical revelation concerning ethics.²

This declaration of the fundamental importance of the Bible for his work is echoed over and over in Ellul's writings. Basic to this stance is the fact that at "around twenty-two years of age, I was . . . reading the Bible, and it happened that I was converted—with a certain 'brutality'."³ Not the preaching of the Church, not the celebration of the sacraments, not a mystical vision, but the individual reading of the Bible was decisive in Ellul's own conversion. During the fifty tumultuous years since that conversion it has been the consistent reading and study of Scripture that has sustained Ellul, his family, and the small Reformed Church in which he is a lay leader. While his indebtedness to the Biblically-oriented theology of Karl Barth certainly also pushes him in this direction, it is his ongoing personal encounter with Holy Scripture that finally undergirds his Bible-centeredness.

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¹For general introduction see D. W. Gill, "Jacques Ellul: The Prophet as Theologian," *Themelios* 7/1 (September 1981) 4-14; C. G. Christians and J. M. Van Hook, eds., *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981); J. Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season* (San Francisco: Harper, 1982).

²*To Will and To Do: An Ethical Research for Christians* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1969) 1.

³"From Jacques Ellul," in J. Y. Holloway, ed., *Introducing Jacques Ellul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 5.

Ellul's commitment to the importance of Scripture comes through in all of his theological and ethical writings. He makes frequent statements on the character and interpretation of Scripture. He provides many samples of his Biblical interpretation, including book-length studies: *L'Homme et l'argent*, *The Judgment of Jonah*, *The Meaning of the City*, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* and *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*. A book on Ecclesiastes is in preparation. Several articles as well as passages in his other books are devoted to Biblical exposition. A good part of Ellul's importance to this subject lies in the fact that he not only deals with theoretical questions and methodology but provides many samples of the application of his approach.

I. BIBLICAL TEXT AND WORD OF GOD

Like Karl Barth, Jacques Ellul differentiates the written text from the living Word of God. In almost the same breath, however, he argues that in practice they are virtually equivalent. The Holy Spirit activates and empowers the text in correspondence with our decision of faith. The revelation in the Biblical text is equivalent to the will of God.

What one ordains and the other requires are therefore practically inseparable. . . . It is clear that every living word of God cannot be different from that which is attested precisely in the Bible. . . . It turns out that the God who spoke to men in the Bible is also our God, and directly ours, thanks to their witness.⁴

In Jesus Christ the law (objective, universal) becomes commandment (personal, individual, concrete address).

The summons of the commandment is contained in its entirety in the Bible. But it does not cease to be a word for being "written" (hence objectified). It does not become letter, nor does the commandment become law. The word inscribed in the Bible is always living, and is continually *spoken* to him who *reads*.⁵

Nevertheless this recognition of God personally summoning us is a decision of faith and obedience. "The word read in the Bible cannot be heard as a personal commandment except by faith."⁶ With such an attitude we can "know the constant surprise of the transition from Scripture to the living word."⁷ The equation works in the opposite direction as well: All "self-styled revelation of the current day" is always "subject to verification by the word revealed in the Bible."⁸

Scripture is of course a book written by people in the historical forms and modes common to their ordinary affairs. This, Ellul argues, is typical of God's action in human history. He adopts human work and fills it with new significance.

⁴*To Will and To Do* 274n.

⁵*Prayer and Modern Man* (New York: Seabury, 1970) 104.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 116. See also Ellul's Preface to *Psaumes*, p. xv. There he describes the Bible as "un livre qui, pour les croyants, contient la parole de Dieu. Dans ce livre, c'est Dieu qui parle" (italics mine).

⁷*The Ethics of Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 125.

⁸*To Will and To Do* 264.

God's word intervenes by "appropriating" a given cultural linguistic form. This appropriation is followed by "contradiction" in the sense that God's message is holy, new and other. Finally there is "expropriation": God seizes this linguistic form into his service.⁹ Thus historical narrative, myth, symbolism, prophecy, poetry, apocalyptic and other literary genres are used by God to convey his word. In fact, Ellul argues, God uses the redactors, editors and compilers of the Bible just as much as he uses the authors of the "original autographs." Biblical revelation has as much to do with the shape of the whole canon and the internal relation of the parts as it does with the original historical meaning of the individual texts.

Ellul periodically distances himself from what he terms the "biblical literalist." Ellul's "literalist" represents "antiquated, outmoded, trivial attitudes."¹⁰

Literalism

closes its ears to the critics almost to the point of *credo quia absurdum*. The danger here is that of attaching faith to a record rather than to Jesus Christ. For the true reality of the book is Jesus Christ and to divert our faith from him to facts which are not so significant in themselves can be a serious mistake.¹¹

Oddly enough, Ellul's attack on much of contemporary Biblical scholarship contains objections similar to those he has against literalism—that is, the Biblical critic's passion for historical and literary dissection of the text leaves little more than a mass of isolated, dusty fragments. The relationship of the parts to the whole and the centrality of Jesus Christ as the Word of God are set aside in the debates about the historical facticity of individual texts.

The heart of Ellul's view of Scripture is that it must be read and understood as a total unity, and this unity must be understood and interpreted in relation to Jesus Christ as the definitive Word of God. There is no such thing as "mere tale," "mere myth," "mere historical incident," etc., in Ellul's reading of Scripture. The original editors and canonizers jealously guarded entrance to the canon. Everything has a point and a meaning.

Thus in *The Judgment of Jonah* (1946) Ellul argues that the (probably later) insertion of the "Song of Jonah" was fully intentional and that, far from being a crude patchwork, the total unity of the book is clear. The book of Jonah is placed, moreover, in the prophetic section of the OT, not the historical section, and its interpretation is to proceed with that in mind. As prophecy, Jonah "plainly declares God's will in a given situation."¹² The prophecy is simultaneously the word of God to Israel and an intimation of Christ. We know that Jonah is, among other things, a figure and type of Christ because Jesus himself used the story in this way and because the internal details of the story make sense as references to him. Ellul disparages any interpretation of the text and its symbols by imposing secret keys or traditions on the text.

We are to interpret them solely by the Bible itself. The consensus of the records of the ongoing thought which is revelation allows us to seize on what may be symbolic

⁹*The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 176; *Ethics of Freedom* 164.

¹⁰*Hope in Time of Abandonment* (New York: Seabury, 1973) 138n.

¹¹*Judgment of Jonah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 10.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 11.

elements in it, but always with the realization that we must keep as much as possible to facts as facts, since revelation has always to be incarnated. Hence, there can be no single method of interpretation. As the different books fall into different categories, so there must be different categories of interpretation, though always related to the unvarying central line: Jesus Christ.¹³

Thus Jonah must be taken as a "significant (and not just a chronological) totality. It has to be taken synthetically, with the internal connections which join the various parts."¹⁴

Ellul repeats his argument for the Christocentric unity of the Bible in *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (1966). "It is impossible to ignore the fact of the unity of revelation and its movement. Everything leads to Jesus Christ, just as everything comes from him."¹⁵ Second Kings, the subject of this volume, is placed in the historical section of the canon. It is a historical description of the intervention of God, especially in human politics. The connection with Jesus Christ turns on the interpretation of Elijah and Elisha as figures of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. The superabundance of miracles in 2 Kings, as in the gospels, is an indication of the unbounded presence of God's Spirit.¹⁶ Though the problems are political the subject is prophecy and revelation, not just principles, ethics and political procedures. Second Kings is concerned with the interaction between God and man and with the intervention of the prophet between God's decision and man's action. As in his other Biblical studies Ellul takes several passing shots at critical historians and exegetes for failing to get at this more fundamental unity and meaning of the text.¹⁷

Ellul's Genesis-to-Revelation study of *The Meaning of the City* (1970) also "takes the biblical text as it is found today, in its entirety."¹⁸ Historical and literary critical studies can of course be helpful, especially in preventing gross errors. Ellul himself engages in some critical detailed study of Hebrew words for "city" (just as in the earlier *Theological Foundation of Law* he engaged in critical study of Biblical words for justice, law and righteousness).¹⁹ But the compiling of the individual books and the formation of the canon as a whole is essential for a true grasp of the Biblical "meaning of the city." "This is why an inclusive reading of the text appears indispensable to me."²⁰ Ellul's inclusive style of interpretation yields an impressive result when dealing with the major themes in the Biblical story of Babylon, Jerusalem and their sister cities. The Ellulian method is much

¹³Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 101

¹⁵*Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 9.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁸*Meaning of the City*, p. xvii.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 9-10n.; cf. *The Theological Foundation of Law* (New York: Seabury, 1969) 37 ff., 88 ff.

²⁰Ibid., p. xviii.

more suspect when in the final section of the study he speculates on the meaning of the symbols of the Apocalypse.²¹

A fourth example of Ellul's understanding of Scripture is his recent *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*. The now-familiar themes appear again. The Apocalypse must be related to Jesus Christ. Its symbolism is not to be feared, even though it has often provoked "delirium" in the past.²² The Apocalypse must be read with respect for the genre of apocalyptic literature. The Apocalypse has a unity with a specific form and an internal movement. Perceiving its meaning requires "comprehension of the structure."²³ The meaning does not reside in the antiquity of the parts but in the total final product as it now stands. The knowledge of the original cultural milieu only partially clarifies the meaning, for the relation of the book to its milieu involves as much tension (contradiction) as it does harmony (appropriation), both in form and content.²⁴

Recent commentaries on the Apocalypse are, in Ellul's view, weak because (1) they study the text scientifically alone, abandoning the meaning, (2) they view it exclusively in historical-cultural terms, forgetting its present and future significance, and (3) they fail to develop a method appropriate to the subject and thus fail to probe the dialectical and symbolic meaning.²⁵ In contrast to these recent efforts Ellul wishes to "discern the specificity of the Apocalypse."²⁶ He argues that the Apocalypse is a distinctive kind of revelation in Scripture, an act of God, which displays "an internal movement."²⁷ It is the "totalization of history in one moment" and the illumination of the meaning of human works and of God's work from the standpoint of the End.²⁸

II. THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

Already in this brief review of four of Ellul's Biblical studies it is possible to identify certain basic assumptions or convictions that characterize his view of Scripture. First, there is "the radical unity which the thought of the Bible exhibits from end to end, over and above the diversity of authorship, schools of thought, and literary forms."²⁹ Thus interpretation must search for the mutual illumination of the parts and the whole and not rest with a study of the parts. Second, this unity is rooted in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Incarnate Word. The

²¹*Meaning of the City* 196 ff.

²²*Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation* (New York: Seabury, 1977) 9-10.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 257.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 29, 137-138, 266-267n.

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 259 ff.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 24, 156.

²⁹*Hope in Time of Abandonment* 142; cf. *To Will and To Do* 47-48.

interpretation of Biblical revelation must be incarnational and Christocentric.³⁰ Third, while the Word of God and the Biblical text are in practice equivalent, revelation requires the action of the Holy Spirit on the one hand and existential commitment on the part of the hearer on the other.³¹ Thus a purely scientific, objective hermeneutic may assist in the understanding of Scripture, but this is clearly inferior and inadequate to the task of interpreting the revealed Word of God. Hermeneutics is properly a task for the believing community. And fourth, Ellul insists that Biblical interpretation proceed in full awareness of the type of Biblical literature being considered and its place in the canon (e.g. prophecy, history, apocalyptic).

A fifth conviction that Ellul's Biblical interpretation evidences has to do with the relevance of the ancient Scriptures for today. Ellul rejects the pretentiousness of modern critics. We have no reason for arrogance or superiority in relation to the ancients.

No one has demonstrated that those values which one rejects—those ethical instructions, that social view, that anthropology—were *only* assumptions of a bygone civilization. After all, even if they are *also* to be credited to a form of traditional civilization, it is quite possible that they were *nevertheless* what God willed for man in the order of the fall, or in obedience to his will.³²

The Bible, as Ellul understands it, is remarkably modern and alive. We must neither cover it with the trappings of tradition and theology, of moralities and rites—making a mummy out of it—nor expurgate it, cut it to pieces and scatter it, like the *membra disjecta* of Orpheus—making an experimental corpse out of it. All that is necessary is to let the explosive power of the word act, just as it is.³³

And again:

I fail to see the justification for accepting as legitimate all the questions about the revelation . . . while at the same time refusing to question those systems, methods, and conclusions from the point of view of the revelation.³⁴

Historical criticism is entirely legitimate as long as (1) it is not an end in itself that fails to move toward understanding of the whole Word of God, (2) it is not a means of affirming the superiority of "man-come-of-age" at the expense of previous human beings, and (3) it is not a means of denying the inspiration and revelation of and in Scripture—that is, raising the Devil's question, "Yea, hath God said?" The problem is that "we can no longer read the Bible in simplicity of heart, because this theology begets suspicion. . . . We are in the period of 'dilution,' of watering down the expression as well as the content of revelation."³⁵

In his major work *The Ethics of Freedom* (1976), Ellul stresses that freedom

³⁰*Hope in Time of Abandonment* 172 ff.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 221.

³²*False Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: Seabury, 1972) 56.

³³*The New Demons* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 224.

³⁴*Hope in Time of Abandonment* 145.

³⁵"Mirror of These Ten Years," *Christian Century* 87 (February 18, 1970) 203.

"implies more than knowing who Jesus Christ is. It also implies knowing the Scriptures."³⁶ The importance of knowing Scripture is underscored by Jesus' own recourse to the Bible in his debates with Satan. We remain free only to the extent that we are "continually questioned afresh by Scripture."³⁷ Revelation is an objective fact: At a given moment God revealed himself to man, and Scripture is witness to that revelation. "The Bible is the objectified datum both of what has been revealed and of what is potentially revealed."³⁸ But while Scripture is an object that may be studied and to which questions may be brought, Ellul regards it as absolutely critical that God be invited to question us through the Bible. It is in this sense that the "Bible *becomes* the Word of God."

Ellul prescribes three areas of freedom in relation to revelation.³⁹ First, we have freedom of interpretation. No interpretation can be definitive, but neither should it be arbitrary. Freedom of interpretation (as all Christian freedom) is always bounded by and oriented toward the glory of God and love of our neighbor. Second, we have a certain freedom of deviation. The basis of our right to err, Ellul argues, is not in liberalism or sentimentality, but in (1) the principle of "speaking the truth in love" (no coercion is permitted in establishing the truth), and (2) the attitude of God toward man in the Bible. God often uses rebellious man and his works for his own glory, even though they are not perfect. This is not a permission to avoid combatting error but a reminder to do so in love.

Third is freedom of research. But this freedom is bounded in five ways: (1) The research method should be specified by and adequately related to the object—i.e., the Bible and the specific book or passage in view. (2) Preceding researches should consciously be taken into account and neither exalted nor rejected too radically. We must be conscious of our indebtedness to and conditioning by preceding research. (3) The goal of research should be to aid the witness and proclamation of the Church, accepting the Bible as a postulate. (4) Research must proceed from a position that is rooted in the word, located in the fellowship of the Church, and ordered to the confession of the faith. (5) The ultimate limit is that one must never raise the Devil's question, "Yea, hath God said?" All Scripture must be approached in openness to God's revelation. All of Scripture is a vehicle through which God has something to say.

Judged by these criteria, says Ellul, much contemporary Biblical research and interpretation is found wanting. He is especially critical of the public airing of research that is prematurely or poorly articulated or shocking for its own sake and thus confusing to the faithful.

III. THE CRITICAL RESPONSE TO ELLUL'S WORK

If Ellul is frequently critical of the approaches taken to Scripture by both conservative and liberal interpreters, how, it may be asked, has his work been re-

³⁶*Ethics of Freedom* 87.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 125.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 161.

³⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 162-184.

ceived by recent critics and reviewers? Ronald R. Ray credits Ellul with having "reminded biblical scholars of some basic Christian convictions that they can easily forget in preoccupation with more technical issues."⁴⁰ Vernard Eller applauds Ellul's labors in a very fitting analogy:

The difference here is between a drama critic's treatment of a playwright's *script* and his treatment of a *performance* of the same play. Most scholarship confines itself to the original script. . . . Ellul evaluates its performance as *Christian Scripture*.⁴¹

Ellul's Biblical studies have also been warmly commended by Brevard Childs:

Fortunately, creative homiletical exegesis is not confined to antiquarian volumes. Jacques Ellul's brilliant interpretation in *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* can be recommended with enthusiasm to the pastor. Obviously, his interpretation is often subjective and at times even fanciful, but Ellul offers a bold and creative mode for serious exposition of Kings. . . . Jacques Ellul's short monograph on *Jonah* is far more akin to the genre of sermon than commentary. Probably the book will satisfy neither the left nor the right in the traditional theological spectrum, but it represents a highly creative, robust theological interpretation which cannot but stimulate serious reflection.⁴²

Typical of the more negative criticism of Ellul's hermeneutic is George Landes' review of *The Judgment of Jonah*.⁴³ Landes finds this study "deeply disappointing." Ellul's Christological interpretation seems incautious, irresponsible and untenable. Ellul has failed to deal adequately with the original meaning of the book and has misinterpreted its meaning in the gospel allusions. A theological interpretation has been imposed "without prior, careful historical exegesis."

Gibson Winter's review of *The Meaning of the City* lashes out at Ellul's work for being "one-sided," "distorted" and "oversimplified."⁴⁴

The distortion appears in two ways: (1) in the imposition on Scripture of a condemnation-fulfillment schema that leads to Christ; (2) in the suppression of the multiple strands of biblical experience and symbol in the name of an apocalyptic interpretation appearing in the first century of our era. . . . The assimilation of the Old Testament, so-called, to this apocalyptic Christ leads to a spurious "Judeo-Christianism" . . . indeed, the term reflects an historical arrogance that has caused unimaginable evil in the West.

Of the same book Walter G. Muelder says that Ellul has written a "powerful sermon" but that, finally, his foundational paradigm of a unified Biblical theology is unacceptable and undemonstrated.⁴⁵

Walter Brueggemann finds *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* "signi-

⁴⁰R. R. Ray, "Jacques Ellul's Innocent Notes on Hermeneutics," *Int* 33/3 (July 1979) 282.

⁴¹V. Eller, "How Jacques Ellul Reads the Bible," *Christian Century* 89 (November 29, 1972) 1214.

⁴²B. Childs, *Old Testament Books for Pastor and Teacher* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 52, 86.

⁴³G. Landes, *Int* 26 (January 1972) 98-99.

⁴⁴G. Winter, *JAAAR* 40 (March 1972) 118-122.

⁴⁵W. G. Muelder, *Christian Century* 88 (March 3, 1971) 299.

ficant," "powerful," "passionate" and "suggestive."⁴⁶ However, it remains "problematic" on methodological grounds. Ellul's exegesis is "risky," "without control," "historically one-dimensional" and, above all, too subjective.

We were offered much Ellul and only some Scripture. I have no quarrel with most of his conclusions, but I wonder whether his method can be used for some other social stance which might be more ideological and demonically-inspired.

David Hubbard's review of the same book found Ellul's message "unusual," "stimulating," "penetrating," but also disturbing.⁴⁷ In particular, Hubbard complains that Ellul leans too far toward the typological hermeneutics of Wilhelm Vischer (*The Witness to Christ in the Old Testament*).

The foregoing criticisms can be summarized in two points. First, there are critics who reject Ellul's program as a whole. Ellul presupposes the legitimacy and desirability of a "continuous" and "inclusive" reading of the canon of Scripture as a (the) book about Jesus Christ. This choice of perspective and agenda is deliberate and explicit. It is *prima facie* neither more nor less legitimate an enterprise than any other narrower or broader historical, scientific or theological paradigm. Its results must be judged first of all in relation to its intentions.

The second criticism is of greater importance—that is, has Ellul done an adequate job in developing a unified, Christological interpretation of Scripture? As most of even his most negative critics would admit, Ellul has been stimulating, provocative and generally illuminating. Questions remain about his sometimes speculative interpretation of types, figures and symbols. It is not the presupposition of a unified Biblical theology centered on Jesus Christ that is the problem. Rather it is the sometimes fanciful, subjective or speculative result that troubles. The saving grace of Ellul's Biblical theology on this issue is that he invites his readers to go beyond him, to "do it better" if they can. Those who read Ellul and disagree (which means all of his readers at one point or another) are driven back into the text with new eyes and new desire to hear more clearly the Word of the Lord.

Aside from more or less important specific points in Ellul's interpretation (for example, his rather weak case for universalism), there are two other issues raised by his approach to Scripture that are significant, especially for American evangelicals. The first of these has to do with his understanding of "the dialectic in accordance with which the biblical revelation is given to us."⁴⁸ Ellul's sociological as well as theological thought is dialectical through and through.⁴⁹ Everywhere Ellul sees paradox, tension and contradiction. On many levels, there will be broad agreement with his views—e.g., the conflict between sin and grace, between this age and the age to come, the paradox of human freedom/responsibility and divine sovereignty, and so on. The difficulty has to do with Ellul's occasional

⁴⁶W. Brueggemann, *JBL* 92 (September 1973) 470-471.

⁴⁷D. A. Hubbard, *Christian Scholar's Review* 3/2 (1972) 172-173.

⁴⁸*To Will and To Do* 1.

⁴⁹Cf. J. Ellul, "On Dialectic," in Christians and Van Hook, eds., *Ellul*; J. Boli-Bennett, "The Absolute Dialectics of Jacques Ellul," *Research in Philosophy and Technology* 3 (1980) 171-201.

assertion that "contradictions, or opposite trends of inspiration, are possible in the Bible," and these must not be brushed aside, twisted into harmony or ignored.⁵⁰ Ellul is temperamentally prepared to live with this sort of contradiction and paradox (at some levels), while others will prefer a casuistic resolution of such tensions.

Finally, however, Ellul always argues that "the harmony of the biblical texts is essential."

Each text should be interpreted by the consensus of the others, and no text carries decisive weight wrested from its theological and historical context.⁵¹

Ellul doubts that contradictions will be found in the same Biblical writer and almost certainly not within one Biblical book. Any "contradiction" (e.g., in ethical guidance on war, marriage, etc.) would appear on a broader level in the canon. In the end, he is convinced, even these "contradictions" can be resolved into a large unity. God is not capricious.

The very revelation which he grants us shows us a remarkable continuity in his decisions. . . . Neither are there conflicts between the successive stages of the revelation. . . . Therefore when we refer back to the revealed word, to the objective testimony contained in the Bible of the living revelation which took place once for all, there is no contradiction. . . . Thus it is legitimate, even ordained, that we should lay hold of that past revelation and seek in it an ethical instruction for today. And for that reason we should be well assured that there is no conflict between the objective revelation and the revelation *hic et nunc*, between Scripture and the Holy Spirit, between the permanent will of God and his *hic et nunc* for each one.⁵²

The problem of contradiction, then, is answered by Ellul's insistence on the unity of Biblical revelation itself and the constancy of God in our times as well as Biblical times.

The second—and ultimately thornier—problem with Ellul's approach to Scripture is what Ronald Ray calls his "moderate approach to facticity."⁵³ In current evangelical parlance, it is the question of inerrancy. The question is not raised because Ellul is in the habit of pointing out various errors in the Bible. The problem is simply that he does not seem concerned to link theological truth assertions to historical or scientific assertions of truth in Scripture. In the case of Jonah, for example:

Whether or not the book is historical is of secondary importance, for the story finds its true value not in itself, in what it is, but in what it denotes. Its relevance derives from the truth which it embodies, from the one who fulfills the prophecy. . . . God brings a great fish. It is idle to seek its name or to consider zoological possibilities with a view to identifying the species. It is idle to ask whether the Mediterranean could have contained such a monster. That is not the question. The real question is: Of what is this fish the sign?⁵⁴

⁵⁰*To Will and To Do* 47-48, 221-222, 300n.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

⁵²*Ibid.*, pp. 263-264.

⁵³Ray, "Innocent Notes" 278-280.

⁵⁴*The Judgment of Jonah* 17, 43.

Ellul has no interest in arguing that Jonah is nonhistorical or that the fish story is impossible. Quite the contrary, Ellul argues that with God all things, including quite miraculous things, are possible. The traditional apologist argues that the truth of Jesus Christ depends on a kind of historical (and demonstrable) facticity here, for our Lord said, "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt 12:40). To this, an Ellulian response says: (1) The truth of Jonah derives from the truth and the facticity of Jesus Christ, crucified, dead, buried and resurrected, and not vice versa. (2) Jonah is deliberately placed in the "Book of the Twelve"—the prophetic, not the historical books—and its historicity should not be pressed so hard for that reason. (3) How far should the comparative "as" (in Matthew 12) be pressed? "As" Jonah was asleep in the fish (not dead)? Is the truth of the parable of the treasure in the field or the pearl of great price or the Good Samaritan undermined if these were not references to historical incidents? None of this is to say that historicity or errancy is unimportant, but rather that the truth and the fact that authenticates all Biblical revelation is the Word of God in Jesus Christ.

What Ellul is arguing for, finally, is careful attention to the revelation of God himself. The creation story, for example, is intended

to show us who is the God of creation, the God of Israel. It is not the description of the process. Consequently, whether the days might be days or not, whether the stages of creation correspond to the scientific model or to the criteria of science—this is not the question. The Bible makes no mistakes when it comes to the revelation of God himself, or about man himself. . . . The important thing is to ask ourselves what is the most essential thing: to know who God is, the God who liberates and pardons me . . . or rather to know how long it took the creation to occur. . . . When God speaks, he cannot lie. He does not lie about himself. The purpose of the Bible is to reveal God to us, and in this purpose God is successful and without error.⁶⁵

Ellul argues that scientific and historical criteria for truth and error are not permanent themselves, and thus to base our belief in God's truthfulness on a scientific or historical "proof" is in itself an uncertain foundation.

Having said all of this, however, a commitment to inerrancy strengthens, rather than contradicts, Ellul's basic view of the truth of Biblical revelation. Inerrancy is compatible with Ellul's view of Scripture, provided it does not direct attention away from Jesus Christ and cause us to place our faith in the text itself rather than in the living God.

IV. ELLUL'S CONTRIBUTION

Jacques Ellul has made three major contributions to an evangelical view of Scripture, especially as it relates to Christian ethics. First, he has affirmed and demonstrated the relevance of the whole canon of Scripture for today. His *Apocalypse* and *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* are excellent examples of this. Both deal with specimens of Biblical literature (Revelation and 2 Kings) that are too easily relegated to less important status as we search the Scriptures for ethical guidance. Interest in these two documents has often centered on a con-

⁶⁵Interview with the author, Bordeaux, June 23, 1982, translated by Lucia and David Gill.

cern to authenticate the past historical record of 2 Kings and to use Revelation to predict future prophetic events. In Ellul's hands these two books come alive as messages of God concerning our current existence as disciples in the world.

Second, Ellul has insisted on the unity of Biblical revelation. *The Meaning of the City* is an example of Ellul's demonstration of a unified Biblical message (in this case about God's view of the city) that may have escaped our attention otherwise. His discussions of money and wealth and of politics are other examples of his work toward a unified Biblical perspective.

Third, Ellul has attempted to center the canon on Jesus Christ. All of Ellul's exegesis takes as its point of departure the question of what this text means in light of the Word of God in Jesus Christ. While some of his attempts border on eisegesis and a rather fanciful typological forcing of the text, in itself this program must be welcomed and applauded. If not Jesus Christ, then what should the center of our Biblical interpretation be?

It is not necessary to accept each of Ellul's exegetical or theological conclusions to profit from his work. It is not necessary to be a universalist or a thorough dialectician to follow him in general outline. Put more positively, his espousal of a unified, relevant, Christ-centered and authoritative Scripture is only strengthened if one brings a toughened-up commitment to an inerrant and plenary-inspired Scripture to his work. Ellul's contribution is best appreciated if he is viewed not as a systematic theologian but rather as a creative, challenging prophet. And for American evangelicals it is important to grant him some benefit of the doubt because of his context: a French Reformed lay Christian working in a situation dominated by "ecumenical liberalism." Seeing him in this light, we will applaud that his cup is at least "half full" rather than attack it for appearing to be "half empty."