

Jacques Ellul: Answers from a Man who asks Hard Questions (1984)
by David W. Gill (1982 Interviews in Bordeaux)

Published in *Christianity Today* 28.7 (April 20, 1984):16-21.

Aldous Huxley has said that Jacques Ellul "made the case" he had tried to make in Brave New World.

Os Guinness believes Ellul's is the "critical voice of the seventies."

CHRISTIANITY TODAY presents this interview by David Gill, recognizing that Ellul does not always square with CT's theological position. It is important, however, for thoughtful men and women to be introduced to such an influential Christian.

We especially hope that this study of Ellul will stimulate fresh thought on how, in this decade, we can deal with godliness, community, witness, and daily work.

CT reorganized and extensively edited the interview transcripts for publication.

BACKPACKER AND SAILOR IN HIS SPARE TIME, Jacques Ellul is a brother in Christ who enjoys struggling against mountain and sea.

But his real foe has for years been the technological society. A little like Samson, he has tried to pull down the pillars of a society in the grip of what he calls "Technique," a "raving rationalism" that centers almost religiously in technology. The intrusive gods of science, efficiency, bureaucracy, artificiality, rationalism, and secularism provoke him to combat.

While criticizing these in *The Technological Society* and other works, his larger purpose has been to call us away from such petty gods to a relationship with the God who sets us free in Christ.

His 40 volumes have been either history and sociology, or theology and ethics. In them he has been a prophetic voice not only to lawyers (he has been a professor of law at the University of Bordeaux), but to sociologists, political

scientists, economists, and historians; and not only to ecumenical Protestants but to evangelicals, Catholics, and non-Christians.

His work rattles the windows of our comfortable churches, offices, and homes.

Ellul is patient when queried about his background. But when attention turns to Christ, Scripture, and our neighbors, he moves to the edge of his seat and the interior fires begin to burn. He wants to provoke reflection, to get us to hear God and genuinely know our neighbors.

He is now retired as professor of the history and sociology of institutions at the University of Bordeaux. In my interviews with him in France, I was assisted by Prof. Joyce Hanks of the University of Costa Rica. My wife, Lucia, translated the tapes, which appear here in edited form.

**CONVERSION, NAZI
OCCUPATION, CAREER AS
PROFESSOR**

When did you discover the Bible in an intense, personal way?

As a young man I read many things in the Bible, but no one ever explained them to me. For three months when I was 15 I attended a catechism class taught by a pastor, but even he could not answer my questions. I had the feeling that you were never to talk about these things at home, so I never asked my mother questions, though she was a strong believing Protestant. (My father was a Voltairian skeptic who did not agree with the Bible or want to explain it.)

But at some point the Bible came alive for you?

During 1927, while I was preparing



for exams that would qualify me for university admission, I studied Goethe's *Faust*. Because of this I reread some things in the Bible, especially the beginning of John. I was very impressed, and continued to look in the Bible over the next few years. For some reason I read Romans 8, which has been decisive for me. Marx posed an answer to the political and economic questions I had as a university student, but he didn't answer the questions of my life. So it was really the Bible that converted me.

There was also a human element that counted quite a bit. A student friend

invited me to meet with a little group of Christian students.

Among early influences, you have often mentioned your friendship with Jean Bosc and Bernard Charbonneau. When did you meet?

I became friends with Charbonneau as a schoolboy of 14 or so. I met Jean Bosc much later when he was national secretary for a Christian student movement. He provided the direction for my theological studies, while Charbonneau especially influenced me in sociology. This came not just through their ideas, but through their lives.

In addition to the significance of these two friends, I'd stress the idea of hope. I have been very critical intellectually, and have tried to state the facts as realistically as possible. But at the same time, hope is central in my work and thought.

By what authors were you influenced in the 1930s and early '40s? Vernard Eller has said that "Ellul keeps Barth on his desk, but Kierkegaard in his heart."

In about 1933 I began reading Kierkegaard. Each time I have read him has been wonderful. Each time he says

what I am thinking. After discovering Kierkegaard, I read Calvin and then Barth. Calvin was impossible! I spent a whole year in the early forties studying him alone. I was very unhappy with it. I cannot get into Calvin's way of reasoning. He is a teacher, but Kierkegaard, it is true, gets into my heart.

Did you have trouble during the Nazi occupation of France?

After I earned my doctorate in law in 1936, I taught as a university professor, but I was dismissed by the Vichy government in 1940 on the ground that my father had never become a French citizen. (I was also in trouble for my statements about the Germans.) Three weeks later, in August 1940, my father was arrested and sent to a detention camp. My wife and I lived on a small farm near Bordeaux for the next four years during the occupation.

What did you do during this period?

I studied theology, for one thing. The theological faculty of Strasbourg was on the other side of the line of demarcation, but gave me a program to study, and corrected my work by correspondence. I did not receive the degree, however, since I did not finish the thesis. During the war I also passed the examination to become a member of the University of Bordeaux faculty of law. I wrote my 1943 book on the history of the discipline of the French Reformed Church, my denomination, for this exam.

In your work with the Resistance, did you help the Jewish community?

That is how I began. I tried to help people, especially Jews, who were being pursued by the Germans. I found false papers for them. I also organized local Resistance groups to serve as links with the *maquis*, the guerrilla soldiers in the outlying areas.

Then the liberation in 1944?

Yes. I was appointed professor of law at the University of Bordeaux. Also, at the moment of liberation those who had led the Resistance were appointed to various council posts in the city government. For a time I was in charge of public works and commerce. But despite our high hopes, I found political reform constantly thwarted by corruption and bureaucracy.

From 1944 to 1980 you were at the University of Bordeaux on the law faculty. And from 1947 on you also taught at the Institute of Political Studies?

Yes, three hours a week I taught history of law, and at the Institute two hours a week I taught on Marx or one of his successors.

My work on "Technique" and the technological society was developed mostly in lectures at the Institute of Politics. For the faculty of law I have taught only doctoral students for the past 20 years.

How have you managed to get so many things written?

No committee work, for one thing. But, nevertheless, it has always been a great problem to find enough time to write and to prepare for my classes. One of my most important activities over the years has been to take 10 or 12 students on a camping trip in the mountains where we would reflect on various political (sometimes religious) ideas. At home, or even when we go on vacation, I have written from 6 to 8 o'clock each morning. At that hour I don't bother anyone. I sleep very little; that is my sickness!

Did the theological and ethical books originate as sermons?

Not exactly, but often my books were the result of Bible studies I prepared for church, or for groups of students who asked me to address a particular subject.

BIBLICAL RELIABILITY

Some say that nearly 50 million Americans profess to being "born again." Your work is particularly important to this community because both you and they are deeply rooted in Scripture. Inerrancy is an important issue here. How do you understand it?

Essentially, we must ask where the error lies. The first question is not whether a passage is literally correct, but why the passage was written. The Bible makes no mistakes when it comes to the revelation of God himself, or man himself. But in other respects it may be contradictory. The Christian must ask what is more essential: to know who God is, the One who liberates and pardons me, or to know that a text is correct according to modern scientific or historical research. The problem is that

our scientific controls are variable; what was considered an error 50 years ago might be considered true today. Science may change; God never lies to me.

Many cults believe in inerrancy. In what way must evangelicals go beyond this?

It is necessary to call ourselves and others to an ethic of responsibility. This means we have to be responsible for the way we read this Bible. We must read with our intelligence and with our community, before God.

LEARNING ETHICS FROM CHRIST

You have stressed that Christ does not conform to this world with its web of bondage and sin. Why do you not go further in spelling out his ethic, perhaps by drawing more on the Sermon on the Mount?

I don't want to give directions that could be built into a rigid ethical system. The Sermon on the Mount has its place, especially in the ethics of holiness and love. I have begun with the ethics of freedom precisely to bring Christians to the position of being free in obedience. If first we obey freely, the rest will come.

If an evangelical's love is restricted to his inner life, he may have made a separation in the person of Jesus between him as Savior and him as Lord. Jesus is both. It is important for ethics not to separate the two.

In your own experience, what is the value of emphasizing a personal relation with Christ in terms of ethics?

In France I often encounter nonbelievers who find the words of Jesus very good, morally speaking. But they take no interest whatever in the person of Jesus Christ. It is necessary to explain that these words are true precisely because Jesus is the Son of God.

What do these ethical words of Christ mean today?

That is the great question for me. I cannot read these words as a man of the Middle Ages, or even of a hundred years ago. I cannot love my neighbor today without taking into account the economic problems of our present society. I cannot love him without recognizing that I am united with, and mutually responsible for, the

evil in the world. It is no longer a question of loving a neighbor who is somehow independent of the economic situation. We are now all responsible.

What is the relation of the Old to the New Testament in developing a biblical ethic? Our view of war, for instance, needs to be illuminated by the example of Joshua and David. Yet how do we relate Christ to this?

All Scripture is inspired by God, and it all reveals Jesus Christ to us. We can never fully know the Christ by reading the Gospels alone, so it is important to read the Old Testament. All the Bible teaches us who Jesus is.

On the question of war in the Old Testament, we must remember that God is not only a God of love, but also the Master of history, and the Judge. The God who was incarnated in Jesus Christ can be a terrible God: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." This text from Hebrews shows us that God can indeed be a fearsome Being. But he is also our Father. Calvinists have sometimes stressed him as Judge and neglected him as Father. One must not forget either side of God. The Word of God teaches us who Jesus Christ is during all of history.

While some aim at high standards, others justify a second-rate discipleship because they know they will fall short. What would you say to them?

The real difficulty is always to know how to make God's calling concrete. Many Christians have become politically involved on behalf of the poor. But we must ask, "Who are the truly poor?" It is not fully obvious. The difficulty is to find how to apply our faith in God to each situation. As we do this, we must not allow self-criticism to immobilize us. I don't know finally if God accepts my actions and choices: the final judgment is his to make. But I trust in his judgment, so I can act in freedom.

ESCHATOLOGY AND UNIVERSALISM

Can a preoccupation with the end times potentially develop into an interest in ethical actions in the present?

We must not consider eschatology as something merely in the future that has no relationship to the present. Eschatology must be lived now. It provides an actual ethic.



How would you answer those who question your eschatology because of its universalism?

I make a difference between judgment and condemnation. I believe everyone undergoes the judgment, but that does not necessarily mean God condemns. In my view, judgment does not consist of the weighing of the good and the bad of a whole lifetime, and ending in the rejection, in certain cases, of the total person. The judgment makes a separation. God keeps all that has been good and rejects everything in us that has been evil.

In distinguishing between judgment and condemnation, are you not separating between the person and his work in a way that contradicts the Old Testament, where a person *is* what a person *does*?

The works of a person last a lifetime. They form a whole history. There is no separation between the being of the person and his works. The judgment happens at the interior of this history of the person. There is a gradual creation of a person during all his lifetime. One cannot view the human being as a static entity. Being and doing are inextricably linked. Of course, man's goodness is not natural goodness. Any he possesses comes only by God's grace, not by one's own righteousness.

You have written that God's future kingdom now invades our present in a

way that is partial but still real. Will God, at some point on our historical time line, decisively intervene and create a new heaven and a new earth?

I am convinced that there is a rupture in history, a break, an End. But the emphasis of my writing has been on the often neglected fact of a series of interruptions in history by God, not just the rupture at the last moment.

THE CHURCH OR INDIVIDUALISM?

In your writings you stress two factors: the lonely individual, and the collective, mass forces of society. In laying so much stress on the individual, have you given enough stress to the church, with its ability to stand up to the institutional principalities and powers?

You are right in pointing out the totally individualistic aspects of my thought and life. I know it is true. Actually, France (and America) have tended to lay too much emphasis on individualism. But there are really not individuals today, but a crowd—a solitary, lonely crowd. So it is necessary to rediscover what it means to be an individual alone with God.

It is difficult to go to the community. All my life I have been in the church and have tried to do all I can for it. But this has not worked out very well. It has not been a community. Since I write not just with my head but with my experience, it is very difficult for me to write on this subject. I have not experienced

community at the level of the World Council of Churches. And for 30 years I participated in the national synod of the Reformed Church of France; for 20 years I was a member of its national council. But I always returned very unhappy after the meetings of these groups.

On the local level, of course, in our little group of 15 or 20 people, we experience some community, but on a small scale. In Bible studies, for example, what I have learned has often come from other members, even when I have been the leader. They have pushed me and caused me to learn new concepts. This community brings out in me the desire to do research. They make my faith grow. I try to avoid the situation where the group listens only to one person. Rather, we should use the gifts of all the members. But it is difficult to bring people to believe that within the church everyone has a gift.

IS "CALLING" THE SAME AS "WORK"?

Are you still convinced that the biblical view of work must begin with the Fall rather than with the doctrine of Creation?

Classically, Christians have held that work existed in the Creation. But it was work in a different sense there. Work in Genesis 1 and 2 was not utilitarian. All

the trees gave their fruit spontaneously, and though Adam was commissioned to watch over the Garden, no enemies threatened him there. So it was a good work, a job, but not one that was a necessity.

Since God's work was creative and very good, can we say that, as much as possible, our work ought to be creative, serving life, leading to products that are very good?

Yes, but I do not think we can say that Creation was a job, work, for God. The Greeks and Babylonians considered Creation to be an effort. But the Bible says it is the Word rather than a work. It is something more simple than work. I agree that God's act was creative, and that what responds in us is word and work. There is a work command, but Adam and Eve were in the presence of God, not merely doing a work or pursuing a vocation. The ideas of work and vocation are confusing, but I believe that vocation (calling) is always and only service to God.

In your books you make a radical distinction between "work" and "calling." But consider your work with the Prevention Club [a ministry to troubled young people in the city]. Does not eve-

rything have an aspect of work to it? And, likewise, cannot work become a calling from God?

I think of a young educator who worked with delinquents of the Prevention Club. He said that when he worked for eight hours during the day he often did it for the pay. But when he continued on after hours because he loved them and they needed him, he became free, and his activities became a calling. Many people engaged in difficult work have this kind of experience.

In your conception of the relation of ethics to "work" and "calling," how has being a Christian made a difference to you as a professor at the University of Bordeaux?

I would like to answer on two levels, one dealing with professionals, and the other with students. My friend Jean Bosc and I started the Association of Protestant Professionals. We discussed professional problems, concretely, just as they are in life. The theologians would describe simply what the Bible says, without spelling out what those present should do. Then the professionals were challenged to figure out what to do, what sort of solution to bring to their problems.

We had some very different experiences! It was easier for doctors and nurses than for business people. The groups that never went along very well were those composed of bankers and insurance agents.

How do you apply your views of "work" and "calling" to your relation with students?

When I began to teach, I quickly discovered that the meaning of my work lay not in the science of transmitting information, but in my relationship to my students. As in the case of my Bible studies, my university students inspired me to undertake research on various questions. I did not do research for the sake of research, but because a group of students were interested in a particular question.

It was important for me that my students knew I was a Christian. I have often lived the experience Peter described: "Always be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." The students should always feel

Is Ellul Against "Technology"?

David Gill: A good deal of confusion has surrounded the words "technique" and "technology" in English translations of your works. Many believe you are opposed to all forms of technology, and that you think it is not only non-Christian but antihuman. Perhaps the French word *technique* ought to be translated into English as "technique" (small t) when it refers to various individual techniques or to the general way of thinking that is not meant to be a kind of religion.

But what would you think of using "Technique" (capital T) in English when referring to the global, almost religious ensemble of means, the way of thinking? Harper & Row will follow this scheme in your next two books. However, the translator of *The Technological System* claims you approved the

continued use of "technology," even for this global idea.

Jacques Ellul: No! Never! Absolutely not! In the first translation of *The Technological Society* it was decided to do just what you are suggesting: use "Technique" with a capital T when it was a question of the totality of techniques. We were not going to use the word "technology." But in spite of this, I was told "technique" was not an English word that could be used this way.

But I have never given my approval to it.

Gill: It is an innovative concept, so why should we not innovate by using a word in a new way?

Ellul: Exactly! It is even becoming a problem in France now because the concepts of Technique and technology are being confused. □

free to ask questions. When, for example, I taught classes on the thought of Marx and his successors, I did not try to teach that Marx was wrong. Marx said some admirable things, and I told my students that this was so. It was amusing to me, then, that students would often ask, "How can you teach this when you are a Christian?" So I would be given opportunity to respond.

I also felt it was important to be available to my students. I had a close pastoral relationship with many of them.

Should we encourage people to bring their work into closer conformity to their calling from God? Sometimes your writings seem to dismiss the possibility of service to God in one's secular work.

I would not have worked so much myself if I had not been convinced that work responds to a certain will of God, and not only to a necessity of the world. The difficulty comes in that it is necessary to appreciate a job in the measure to which it is creative and liberating. I agree with the Reformed tradition in refusing to make a simple distinction between work that is good and work that is not good. I have a new group forming in Paris, composed of bankers and stockbrokers. They are Christians. Can I tell them that a Christian should not be a stockbroker? That is very difficult to do.

Peter directed Cornelius's attention to Christ as Lord, and left him as a Roman centurion. But it was not long before most Christian "Corneliuses" (army officers) left their commissions. What would happen if we followed Paul's example with bankers and stockbrokers?

I agree with this approach. But the problem remains that there are various techniques used in different jobs. It is difficult to judge accurately and fairly whether the work is to the glory of God—that is, whether it is creative and liberating.

Is it fair to summarize your advice to Christian lawyers by saying that you think they should gather to analyze their profession and practice realistically? Do you think they should study biblical notions of justice and law, and then discuss and pray to discover what this means for their law practices?

That is a fair summary. The first

point is very important, especially for lawyers, since they are tempted by idealism. It is well and good to serve the law, but they must understand the reality of what is happening. Just last month a young man struck his daughter, who then fell on the sidewalk, becoming crippled and blind as a result of a spinal injury. The prosecuting attorney was a Christian, as were the defending attorney and the judge. I know all three quite well.

The father had a temper, but was a good man, sensitive and devastated by this accident. However, the press portrayed him as an unworthy, scandalous father. The prosecutor was appalling, and the defending lawyer had no concrete defense. The young man was sentenced to 17 years in prison and hung himself the next day.

I told the lawyers afterward, "You did not realistically judge the person in this matter." It is important to stress the need of the legal profession to be realistic and responsible.

What were your experiences with the Association of Protestant Professionals?

Most lasted six years, from 1947 to 1953. Participants, who might have been businessmen, for instance, submitted problems. We tried to get them to reflect on practical matters. There were congresses, study courses, and consultations. A businessman might submit a business venture for the group's study and discussion. Two groups, doctors and teachers, have continued to this day, but the others have not.

In some of your writings about alternative education you have recommended getting off into the mountains, camping and so on. Do you think a Christian college is wrong to locate near a major secular university?

In France there is an interesting experiment at Aix-en-Provence. A group of Christians have installed a theological school right next to the university's college of letters and sciences. They are succeeding very well. The university is lay and secular, and has no moral preconceptions or idealism. The faculty of theology is thus the place where students can find responses to their questions.

Can we hope that theologically and ethically trained professionals might go back

to their churches and teach a Christian view of work and discipleship to the blue-collar workers who worship with them?

It sounds excellent. For workers, Christianity has appeared at other times to be either a means of getting them to accept their condition, or a means of criticizing society. I believe this criticism is specially important, and that some new associations of workers might be created, since American labor unions are not at all in the business of transforming society. It is important to have Christian associations that ponder changes in society.

"AFTERWORD," BY DAVID GILL

What are we to think of Jacques Ellul? In the introduction to his In Season, Out of Season I have stated part of my own answer:

"While the label 'prophet' is tossed about rather loosely these days, I believe that in the case of Jacques Ellul it is fully appropriate. The value of the prophet lies in his ability to disturb the status quo, to put in question what is taken for granted, to shed new light on old issues, to bring in a new perspective. As in the commission to the prophet Jeremiah, the prophet acts by 'uprooting, tearing down, destroying, and overthrowing,' and by 'building and planting.' The prophet is both angry and compassionate. He brings a Word from outside. He brings a challenge.

"On the other hand, the prophet has limitations. The prophet is not a teacher in the full sense of the term. The teacher gives a more complete, reasoned exposition of the truth, filling it out and applying it. Ellul's work has many rough edges and not a few blind spots, overstatements, and contradictions. As 'teaching,' Ellul's work is lacking in various ways. But as 'prophecy,' it is an explosive challenge that is ignored only at great loss. Americans need to give a continued and expanded hearing to the Bordeaux prophet in our technological wilderness." □

David W. Gill is dean and associate professor of Christian ethics at New College, Berkeley, California. He is the author of The Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul (Scarecrow; ATLA Monograph), and other writings on Ellul.

