

Jacques Ellul: The Prophet as Theologian by David W. Gill (1981)

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No argument is necessary to convince anyone that Jacques Ellul is one of the most prolific authors of our time. But if Ellul teaches us anything, it is that quantity is not everything! The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it is intended to present the overall burden of Ellul's voluminous authorship, especially as it concerns theology. Second, it is argued that Ellul's work is best understood and appreciated if it is understood as a kind of prophecy—not least to the theological guild.

1. Prophet or Teacher?

While the vocation of 'theologian' is not explicitly mentioned in the New Testament as one of the gifts of the Spirit, it is assumed to be a variant of the gift of 'teaching'. According to one author, the spiritually gifted teacher 'did not utter fresh revelations, but expounded and applied established Christian doctrine'. 'The "word of knowledge", implying research and intellectual appreciation, is related to teaching.' In contrast to the teacher, the prophet conveyed 'divine revelations of temporary significance which proclaimed to the Church what it had to know and do in special circumstances'.¹ Nevertheless, the prophet's discourse (*logos*) concerns God (*theos*) and as such is important for the discipline we call theology.

Over the past thirty years a steady stream of literature, explicitly or implicitly Christian in nature, has flowed from the pen of Jacques Ellul of Bordeaux in southern France.² Much of this production has to do with matters of God and faith in our era. Considered as 'teaching'—as an ordered exposition of the received truth of Christian revelation—this material may be inadequate, infuriating,

or incomprehensible to some readers. But considered as 'prophecy'—as a proclamation of the Word of God for this moment and this situation—Ellul's writings can be appreciated as one of the most significant contributions to the Christian mind in our century.

By profession and formal training, Jacques Ellul is, of course, a teacher. Since 1946 he has been Professor of the History and Sociology of Institutions at the University of Bordeaux. As a sociologist and historian he has published some twenty volumes, the best known of which are *The Technological Society*, *The Political Illusion*, and *Propaganda*, and well over one hundred articles.³ During the same period, as an active lay theologian and ethicist, Ellul has produced another fourteen volumes and many articles and reviews. In this latter capacity, Ellul has also been editor of *Foi et Vie*, the French theological journal, since 1969. He has served on various committees of the Reformed Church of France as well as the World Council of Churches. In personal appearance and manner, Ellul is much more the university professor than the radical prophet in the mould of John the Baptist or Che Guevara. Like the Apostle Paul, his appearance and speech may be unimpressive, but his letters are weighty and forceful, if not also frightening (2 Cor. 10: 9-10).

Ellul has rarely and only grudgingly left his home base in Bordeaux, but his 'letters' have reached far and wide. Despite appearances, the man is best understood as a kind of modern prophet. Not only the content but the rhetorical style of his message is best appreciated as a challenging message for the times, a cry in the technological wilderness, a provocation to reorient us and motivate us to go further.

Would Ellul accept the designation of prophet? Probably not. But then, prophets are seized by revelation and by their task and may not be the best judges of their own significance. The observation that Ellul's work is best understood in the genre of prophecy is based partly on the character of the work itself and partly on a juxtaposition of

¹ W. G. Putman, 'Spiritual Gifts', in J. E. Douglas, ed., *The New Bible Dictionary* (London: Inter Varsity Press, 1962; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 1213.

² See my extensive bibliography of the works of Ellul in Clifford G. Christians and Jay Van Hook, eds., *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 1980).

³ *The Technological Society*, trans. by John Wilkinson (New York: Knopf, 1964); *The Political Illusion*, trans. by Konrad Kellen (New York: Knopf, 1967); *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. by Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Knopf, 1965).

meaning of their involvement in the modern world?

In *Mirror of These Ten Years* Ellul articulates his conviction that there is no comprehensive Christian system possible and there are no 'pre-fabricated' solutions for social, political, economic, or moral problems. Instead, it is out of a profound knowledge of reality, out of the confrontation of opposing dialectical forces, that solutions will come. God puts the questions to us and we provide the answers.

For it is only out of the *decision* he makes when he experiences this contradiction—never out of adherence to an integrated system—that the Christian will arrive at a practical position.*

The clearest declaration of intention was given by Ellul in an interview with David Menninger:

I would say two things to explain the tenor of my writings. I would say, along with Marx, that as long as men believe that things will resolve themselves, they will do nothing on their own. But when the situation appears to be absolutely deadlocked and tragic, then men will try and do something. That's how Marx described the capitalist revolution and the situation of the proletariat—as something absolutely tragic, without resolution. But he wrote this knowing as soon as the proletariat sees his situation as without resolution, he'll start to look for one. And he'll find it.

Thus it is that I have written to describe things as they are and as they will continue to develop as long as man does nothing, as long as he does not intervene. In other words, if man resists passive in the face of technique, of the state, then these things will exist as I have described them. If man does decide to act, he doesn't have many possibilities of intervention but some do continue to exist. And he can change the course of social evolution. Consequently, it's a kind of challenge that I pose to men. It's not a question of metaphysical fatalism.

And later on in the interview:
The purpose of my books is to provoke a reaction of personal reflection, and to thus oblige the reader to choose for himself a course of action.¹⁹ One of the most difficult to accept aspects of

¹⁹ From Jacques Ellul, in James Y. Holloway, ed., *Introducing Jacques Ellul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 6.
¹⁸ 'Mirror of These Ten Years,' *The Christian Century* 87 (18 February 1970), p. 200.
¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 201.
¹⁶ David C. Menninger, 'Jacques Ellul: A Tempered Profile,' *Review of Politics* 37 (April 1975), p. 241.

his descriptions of the aim of his work and of the role of the ancient prophets of Israel. In his study of 2 Kings, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, Ellul describes the prophet as follows:

Man chooses his own actions. But between this decision by man and God's decision we find the prophet. This man has received a revelation of God's intention either before or during the course of the enterprise. He announces and can bend or provoke, but there is no necessity or determination. One is in the presence of open possibilities here. This man also understands what the politician is wanting. He understands it in depth. He sees the reality behind the appearance of the action, and he discloses to the politician his true intention, his situation.

Finally this man gives the meaning of it all, the true significance of what has happened. He brings to light the relation that exists between the free determination of man and the free decision of God.

Thus the prophet plays a role which is radical and decisive and yet also independent, ex-centric, and disinterested.*

The prophet thus 'provokes', 'explains', and 'risks'. The prophet is traditionally in conflict with the king, the guardian of the institutional and established. In this conflict the prophet is 'absolutely wholly other', 'absolutely new and surprising', and he 'disturbs our ritual, morality, and piety'. The prophet is the 'son of thunder who interests and overthrows, affirming that God is not the God of the past or of the dead, but the God of the present and the living'. The prophet brings the Word of God to bear on 'the actual, concrete situation or engage in any action'. He says: listen to the Word of God and make your decision. The prophet opens up situations by mediating the Word of God who is Wholly Other.

If we turn from this biblical study of 2 Kings to some of Ellul's autobiographical comments in other contexts, the correspondence with the role of the prophet is remarkable. He has often said, for example, that no solutions or systems will be offered by him.

I refuse to construct a *system* of thought, or to offer up some pre-fabricated socio-political solutions. I want only to provide Christians with the means of thinking out for themselves the

* *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, trans. by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 20-21.
¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.
¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Ellul's work is his habitual overstatement, where he sounds as though life is all over, no political change or revolution is possible, etc.—or, conversely, where he proclaims the great victory of God or the radical transformation of human history by the Incarnation. Part of the reason for this hyperbole is his persistent and radical dialectical method. But another reason, we can now see, is that he is writing in the heat of passion and concern. He engages in rhetorical exaggeration to try to provoke a degree of response that may ultimately redeem a situation.

Like most prophets, Ellul's offence is not only his message but his style as well! Richard L. Rubenstein, for example, is thoroughly offended by Ellul's lack of 'ordinary civility', 'sustained intemperance', and 'ungenerous way of dealing with his opponents'.¹¹ Another reviewer reacts to Ellul's 'continued petty, personal sniping at his colleagues', 'crotchety ill-temper', 'hectoring, sarcastic tone', and 'jeering'.¹² Both reviewers are partly justified in these remarks. And if Ellul offends others, he is himself guilty of 'thin skin' and a persecution complex at times, moaning that no one will listen to him and that his best efforts are useless. Like most prophets, Ellul is somewhat isolated, somewhat a 'loner'.

One important qualification which must be made on this 'Ellul-as-prophet' thesis is that his intended audience is not the population in general. He does not have much direct impact on the masses, either in the marketplace or in the churches. Rather, he speaks primarily to the intellectual and academic community. In this arena he is remarkable for having provoked comment (at least) in so many different academic disciplines (sociology, law, political science, theology, etc.) and so many different constituencies (Marxists, humanists, Liberal and Evangelical Christians, etc.). He has a special concern for two groups: the political Left and the Christian intelligentsia.¹³

As an ethicist or theologian, as a 'teacher', Ellul leaves something to be desired. At some points his approach needs revision or supplementation. As a prophet to the intellectuals, and especially to Christians, however, he is an important and much-needed voice. Ellul's style is always provocative and challenging, sometimes harsh and offensive

¹¹ Richard L. Rubenstein, Review of *The New Demons, Psychology Today* (November 1975), p. 18.

¹² Edgar Z. Friedenberg, 'Faithful Servant Old and Cross,' Review of *The Betrayal of the West, Canadian Forum* (October-November 1978), pp. 42-44.

¹³ On the Christian intellectual, see *The Presence of the Kingdom*, trans. by Olive Wyon (New York: Seabury, 1967), pp. 96-136; on the Left, see *The Betrayal of the West*, trans. by Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Seabury, 1978), pp. 82-146.

when he happens to hit a few innocent targets in his mad iconoclasm. My own review essay published shortly after the publication of *The Ethics of Freedom*, summed up his impact in these terms:

Another way of describing the total thrust of *The Ethics of Freedom*, and most of Ellul's previous work for that matter, is to say that Ellul 'takes everything away' from us. He removes our commonplaces and securities, destroys our idols, crutches, and supports, ruthlessly strips away our justification, and attacks our conformity to the world and lack of faith in Christ. Both through sociological criticism and through biblical exposition, he leaves us with no way out, with the exits sealed off, with no hope. But wait! In this work, more than any since *The Presence of the Kingdom* (1948), Ellul gives it all back with what can only be described as an inspiring vision of hope and freedom.

The effect of this strategy is to give all activists pause, to pull us back from our relentless plunge into frenetic activity in the world. We are helped to assess the reality of the world more profoundly and hear the Word of God more attentively. Then we are led back into the fray in obedience to our Lord. After everything has been closed off, *The Ethics of Freedom* throws open the doors, batters down the walls, and opens out on a whole new life of freedom in service of God and our neighbour. 'The radical devaluation of everything in society is accompanied by the revaluation (the only one) that everything, by the grace of God, may be able to serve the kingdom' (p. 312). It can hardly be disputed that this approach exemplifies, on the level of contemporary Christian ethical discourse, the pattern of 'leaving all, hating all', and embarking on the path of radical discipleship to Jesus Christ that is repeatedly given in the Gospels.¹⁴

2. The Passing of the Mantle

Just as surely as Elisha picked up the mantle of the prophet Elijah, Jacques Ellul stands as successor to other voices, other prophets. As a leading critic of the technological society, Ellul's work has affinities with that of Friedrich Schiller, Thomas Carlyle, and the Romanticists of the Industrial Revolution period who raised warnings about the ominous nature of a generally mechanistic, rationalistic view of life and the world.¹⁵ Schiller, for

¹⁴ David W. Gill, 'Activist and Ethicist: Meet Jacques Ellul,' *Christianity Today* 20 (10 September 1976), p. 1222.

¹⁵ See Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford, 1964).

example, railed against the degenerative effects of the growth of machines on European culture. The machine was leading to 'The Machine' as a social system and world view. Thomas Carlyle (who, not incidentally, published a 'Life of Schiller in 1823-1824) developed this argument by suggesting that the Age of the Machine had an 'outward sense', referring to machine technology, but also an 'inward sense', that is, an internal spiritual patterning of art, religion, and other human activities on the model of the machine. In 1829 Carlyle wrote that 'it is the Age of Machinery in every outward and inward sense of that word'. Many apologists for industrialization countered these charges on Newtonian and Enlightenment grounds: opposing Nature to Machine is false, for the universe itself is a great machine, like a great clock designed and set in motion by the great Clockmaker in the sky!

The list of important predecessors of Ellul must also include the pioneer sociologists of the later nineteenth century. Emile Durkheim, who created the first course in sociology to be offered at a French university while a professor at Ellul's own University of Bordeaux (1887-1902), perceived the pivotal significance of the division of labour, the breakdown of traditional groups and values, and the impact of all this on social solidarity. In this way Durkheim anticipates Ellul's analysis at several points—although Ellul's differences with him are perhaps even more striking. Max Weber's work on rationalization and bureaucracy is echoed loudly in Ellul's work. Weber's fear that the encroachment of *zweckrational* forms of action on all phases and areas of individual and social life was yielding an 'iron cage, a nullity without heart' for a society, is fully shared by Ellul.¹⁸

Unquestionably the most important sociological ancestor of Ellul is Karl Marx. While a university student in 1931, he 'chanced' to read Marx's *Das Kapital* and became an enthusiastic 'Marxist'. He studied Marx's writings a great deal but never joined the Communist Party because it seemed so far from Marx. In addition to the hypocrisy of all the political groups Ellul saw trying to carry on under the banner of Marx, a second challenge to his own 'Marxism' came with his conversion to Christ around 1934. His great concern in the mid-Thirties was to know if he could be both Marxist and Christian. By 1938 he 'chose decisively for Christianity' believing that all attempts at a Marxist-Christian synthesis led to a betrayal of the

faith: Christianity was swallowed up by Marxism, not vice versa.

A third challenge to Marx was historical change. As great as Marx was, he was not simply transferable to the twentieth century. Put in negative form, for our age Marx is one of 'humanity's great malefactors' in that his system, when absolutized, betrays the individual to the class or the group, creating an insidious 'suspicion' that interprets all individual willing and acting as mere reflection of class interest.¹⁷ More positively, Ellul locates his work in relation to Marx as follows:

Marx showed me the dialectical nature of social phenomena, and also oriented me strongly toward the study of technique. I was actually a Marxist in 1933-1934, and I asked myself then: If Marx were alive today, would he be so disposed to cite as the crucial social phenomenon of history the ownership of property? What would he cite as crucial? And I decided that it would be the phenomenon of technique. Of course, this is something that many followers of Marx today would not propose.¹⁸

In short, Ellul selectively accepts parts of Marx's analysis. More importantly, he carries on the Marxist (and European) sociological tradition seeking to 'grasp society in its totality' and to discover 'fundamental laws of historical evolution' in a synthetic, historical, comprehensive and sometimes progressive, revolutionary way.¹⁹

What makes *this* modern-day prophet particularly interesting is that he has picked up not one but two mantles. In addition to his sociological calling Ellul has pursued theology:

I have sought to confront theological and biblical knowledge and sociological analysis without trying to come to any artificial or philosophical synthesis; instead I try to place the two face to face, in order to shed some light on what is real socially and real spiritually.²⁰

It is Karl Barth who is most explicitly recognized by Ellul as his theological tutor and source, though Ellul says that he is not an 'unconditional Barthian'.²¹ On the one hand, 'the theology of Karl Barth is extraordinarily balanced. I believe it is true precisely in the degree in which it expresses the

¹⁷ *Hope In Time of Abandonment*, trans. by C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1973), pp. 48-52.

¹⁸ Menninger, p. 239.

¹⁹ See Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, I (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1968), pp. 1-11.

²⁰ 'From Jacques Ellul,' p. 6.

²¹ *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 8.

¹⁸ See Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1933) and Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford, 1946), pp. 196-244.

remarkable dialectic that appears throughout the Bible'.²² On the other hand:

I had the impression that the ethical consequences of Barth's theology had never been elicited. I was not satisfied with his volumes of ethics and politics, which seemed to be based on an insufficient knowledge of the world and of politics. However, there was everything there necessary to formulate an ethic without losing any of the rediscovered truth, being totally faithful to the Scriptures, but without legalism or literalism. But this work seemed possible to me only if one conserved the groundwork laid by Barth and did not start over.²³

By far the greatest number of references to any theological predecessor in Ellul's writings are to Karl Barth. Nevertheless, it is Søren Kierkegaard who stands most clearly as the nineteenth century Elijah to this twentieth century Elisha.

What then do I mean when I say that our hope lies in starting from the individual—from total subjectivity?

* * *

This radical subjectivity will inform . . . the three human passions which seem to be the essential ones—the passion to create, to love, to play. But these mighty drives of the human heart must find a particular expression in each person. It is in the building of a new daily life.

* * *

I am convinced that Christians are absolutely the only ones who can attempt it—but here too on condition that they start from zero. Kierkegaard, it seems to me, alone can show us how to start.²⁴

No one can read Kierkegaard and Ellul without observing the strong similarity of content and substance. Both give great attention to the subjectivity/objectivity issue, calling for 'radical subjectivity' in the face of a sterile objectivizing tendency in modern thought. Both stress the importance of 'passion'. Perhaps most obvious of all is the 'beloved individual' of Kierkegaard who lives again in Ellul's writings. Although the terminology is different, Kierkegaard's three 'stages on life's way' are profoundly echoed in Ellul's ethics.

In addition to matters of content, there are intriguing similarities of style and vocation. Think, for example, of the division of Kierkegaard's authorship into philosophical works and edifying

²² *False Presence of the Kingdom*, trans. by C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1972), p. 9.

²³ 'Karl Barth and Us,' *Sojourners* (December 1978), p. 24.

²⁴ 'Between Chaos and Paralysis,' *The Christian Century*, 85 (5 June 1968), p. 749.

discourses—and Ellul's attempt to clearly distinguish his sociological works from his theological works. Both Kierkegaard and Ellul address the religious intellectual, trying to stir up a nominal, formalized affair into something passionate and vital. Both prophets use irony, sarcasm, accusation, petulance, and overkill in their rhetoric. Both are given to a bit of 'everybody misunderstands me'. How are we to understand this except as a kind of occupational hazard faced by prophets? The prophet stands as a contradiction to the contemporary establishment. This contradiction is as often one of style as of substance.²⁵

In summary, Ellul has inherited his mantle from the school of prophets Marx, Kierkegaard, and Barth. Common to them all is a dialectical method. In fact, Ellul says 'I am a dialectician above all; I believe nothing can be understood without dialectical analysis.'²⁶ As we have seen, Marx taught Ellul 'the dialectical nature of social phenomena'. And in his theological and ethical studies as well, Ellul says that his 'method is the dialectic in accordance with which the biblical revelation is given to us'.²⁷ The theology of Ellul, like that of Barth and, even more, Kierkegaard, is thoroughly dialectical.

Contradiction, opposition, and paradox are ever-present in anything Ellul has in view. Axiomatic-deductive, linear logic, rationalistic 'scientism' or 'epiricism'—these are relativized or rejected. Understanding, whether of theology or society, results from a true perception of the various antithetical factors and forces at work. On the broadest level, there is a dialectical nature of Ellul's authorship: on the one hand, his sociological description of the world, on the other, the biblical-theological articulation of the Word. It is a 'composition in counterpoint'.²⁸ These are two perspectives which shed light on our experience, yet cannot be synthesized into a unified 'Christian sociology' or 'social Christianity'. Corresponding to this dialectic of the world and the Word is the dialectic between necessity (the character of the world) and freedom (of the Word of God).

In general, Ellul endorses Hegel's description of the 'positivity of negativity'. That is, the negative

²⁵ I first outlined the foregoing critique of Ellul's relationship to Kierkegaard in a letter to Vernard Eller, 19 March 1977; Eller subsequently elaborated my critique in his chapter on Ellul and Kierkegaard in the volume edited by Christians and Van Hook.

²⁶ Menninger, p. 240.

²⁷ *To Will and To Do: An Ethical Research for Christians*, trans. by C. Edward Hopkin (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1969), p. 1.

²⁸ 'Mirror of These Ten Years,' p. 201; 'From Jacques Ellul,' p. 6.

pole in the dialectic has a real value. The resolution of dialectical contradiction, tension and interaction would spell the end of life, individually or socially. Life implies movement, change and development through the interplay of opposing forces. Of course, change in this manner is not necessarily progress—on this point Ellul diverges from both Hegel and Marx. But for Ellul, innovation and mutation, revolution and conversion are manifestations of life. Not only between his sociology and theology but also within each of the two areas, Ellul describes (and to a certain extent promotes) dialectical contradiction.

Any synthesis or resolution of antithetical factors and forces takes place in terms of crisis and life—not in terms of an easy intellectual operation or a peaceful transition to a new condition. The crisis of resolution happens in an ‘explosion’, a moment of illumination, destruction and recreation. While the resolution changes the situation and modifies the forces which led to that point, a new dialectical tension emerges. Life is thus a process of tension, conflict, and resolution, followed by further tension, conflict, and resolution.

So far as the solution is concerned, it cannot be a rational one; it can only be a solution in terms of *life*, and the acceptance of forgiveness given in Jesus Christ. In other words, it is in receiving, and in living the Gospel that political, economic, and other questions can be solved.²⁹

In both Ellul’s theological and sociological works, decisive importance is placed on the individual as the focal point for dialectical tension and resolution. ‘Whether we like it or not, all depends entirely on the individual.’³⁰

3. The Technological Wilderness

As a ‘theological prophet’ or ‘prophetic theologian’, Ellul’s understanding of the world—the ‘wilderness’ in which he cries out ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord’—is informed above all by a concept of the ‘fall’ and by a concept of the ‘powers’ (*exousia*). With respect to the fall, Ellul’s view can only be described as radical. ‘The broken communion with God totally changes the life of the creature.’³¹

If the fall and evil were not totally serious, would God have gone to the extreme of this unthinkable sacrifice of his Son, of this incomprehensible self-deprivation? For the work of salvation to be as great as that, the alienation in the fall must have been fundamental. The *whole* must have

been shattered for the *whole* to have been restored. The *whole* must have been lost for the *whole* to have needed to be saved by grace.³²

There are, in Ellul’s view, no unblemished vestiges of the original creation. The fall was not simply a fall of the will, but of reason and nature.

The break with God has global consequences, three of which must be noted here. First, separated from the transcendent, Wholly Other God, the world is closed in upon itself. It becomes the world of necessity.

It was a creation which had been made for the love and the joy of God. It was the very place of freedom, for nothing could be the expression of God except the freedom of his creation. Nothing could have responded to God except the spontaneous free gift. . . . There cannot be any necessity in that creation because God is not subject to necessity; and that which he creates is not the fruit of a torturing and implacable will, but of love. . . . Once love has disappeared through the will to power, the significance of everything changes. The order established by God ceases to be a free gift and becomes an external restraint.³³

Necessity means that ‘several forces act upon man but we cannot say that they represent the totality of his universe or that they condition directly and immediately his whole life and work’.³⁴ Ellul refuses a rigid determinism or mechanistic view of either the individual or society. Nevertheless, as examples of the factors and forces of necessity Ellul discusses political power, money, technology, the city and religion. ‘These necessities do not have to be merely rational or sociological. They have also a spiritual and theological dimension.’³⁵

Second, the fall means that the will to love is replaced by the will to power. Eros, understood as the will to power, is the spirit of the fallen world. It is the attempt to dominate, master, and subdue not only nature but humanity and even oneself. It is fundamentally an effort to act in place of God, from whom the fall has cut us off. And as a third consequence of the fall, Christian ethics and theology cannot be built on the basis (even partially) of nature. There can be no natural theology, natural law or natural morality that corresponds to the ethics and theology of grace and revelation. This is true for ‘epistemological’ reasons (we cannot rely on natural reason or conscience to discern the

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

³¹ *Ethics of Freedom*, p. 37.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁹ *Presence of the Kingdom*, p. 18.

³⁰ *The Political Illusion*, p. 224.

³¹ *To Will and To Do*, p. 39.

good) as much as for reasons of the will (we cannot rely on natural inclination or natural powers to perform the good). Morality of the world is inextricably of the order of necessity and the order of the fall.³⁶

As another way of illuminating the shape of the wilderness, Ellul draws on the 'principalities and powers' language of Scripture.

The Bible speaks of forces which subjugate man. These are distinct from the flesh, which in some sense assimilates itself to man. They are not just evil and rebellious powers. They are not just powers which Scripture has . . . personalized. . . .

The powers seem to be able to transform a natural, social, intellectual or economic reality into a force which man has no ability either to resist or to control. This force ejects man from his divinely given position as governor of creation. It gives life and autonomy to institutions and structures. It attacks man both inwardly and outwardly by playing on the whole setting of human life.³⁷

Following Cullmann and Barth, Ellul believes this 'powers' language, far from being outmoded, primitive mythology, is a valid description of reality. The Bible mentions the state and money as powers, Ellul says, but we are also justified in seeing technology, the 'system', religion and other elements of the world in the same light.

The powers are described in a different setting as the seals on the 'scroll of history' in the Apocalypse. These seals give the chief elements in human history. The first four seals evoke the 'four horsemen' who are 'at work always, in all epochs, and in all regimes'.³⁸ In brief, the white horse represents the Word of God, the red horse represents the state and political power, the black horse represents economic power, and the pale horse represents the power of death. To these are added the fifth seal which is the prayers of God's witnesses, and the sixth seal which brings about the cataclysms and the appearance of the people of God.³⁹ Once again, Ellul argues that these powers do not show themselves in a systematic causal nexus. Nevertheless, Jesus Christ reveals this ensemble as the summary key to the history of the 'wilderness'.

The fall, necessity, the powers, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse . . . these are the organizing concepts in Ellul's prophetic analysis of our world. The analysis has focused at length on the city,

³⁶ *To Will and To Do*, pp. 39-72.

³⁷ *Ethics of Freedom*, pp. 144, 152-153.

³⁸ *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, trans. by George W. Schreiner (New York: Seabury, 1977), p. 150.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 144-170.

which is 'man's essential work—the culture of man in history and eternity'.⁴⁰ The city is, both in Scripture and in the contemporary world, the focal point of human society and culture, the symbol as well as the real product of human work. Today's city is characterized above all, in Ellul's view, by the rule of technique—raving rationalism. Similar attention has been focused by Ellul on politics and the state.⁴¹ The point of Ellul's analysis is always to indicate the awesome, threatening power of these factors and forces before which the individual is progressively weaker and more dependent, despite all pretensions to freedom. In form and function, though not by common label, these forces evidence a spiritual and religious character, making them all the more difficult to effectively resist.⁴²

The novelty of Ellul's approach here is not so much his theological reading of creation and fall, reason and revelation, nature and grace, or the principalities and powers. Debate has raged for decades, if not centuries, on the exegetical and theological questions involved. What qualifies Ellul as a *prophetic* theologian is the force and determination with which he pursues the contemporary application of his theological perspective. In his work the fall and the powers are no longer an academic question but an existential and ethical question that confronts modern Christians very directly and creatively. Even if Ellul has misapplied this perspective, it remains extremely valuable as prophetic provocation to assess things more clearly than he has. If that is the case, he has succeeded as a prophet even if his achievement as a theologian is mixed or debated.

4. Thus Saith the Lord

The prophet does not restrict his message to a description of bondage and demonic powers, of course. There is a positive side to the 'Thus saith the Lord.' Thus, to the world of necessity, Ellul proclaims freedom. To the world of the fall he proclaims not a return to Eden but the reality of the age-to-come. To the will to power, Eros, he responds with the will to loving servanthood, Agape. To Babylon, the earthly city, he preaches the New Jerusalem, the city of God. To the restrictive bondage of the principalities and powers, Ellul proclaims the victory of God in Jesus Christ.

⁴⁰ *The Meaning of the City*, trans. by Dennis Pardee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. xviii.

⁴¹ See *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man, The Political Illusion*, and 'Rappels et réflexions sur une "Théologie de l'état"', in Ellul, *et. al.*, *Les Chrétiens et l'Etat* (Tours: Maison Mame, 1967), pp. 129-180.

⁴² See *The New Demons*, trans. by C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1975), pp. 48-87.

The Word of God, for Ellul, is above all Jesus Christ. 'I refuse to pledge my mind to anything or anyone, save Jesus Christ.'⁴³ 'The word of God is fully expressed, explained, and revealed in Jesus Christ, and only in Jesus Christ, who is himself, and in himself, the Word.'⁴⁴ 'If it is true that God himself has come, does this not mean that everything has changed?'⁴⁵ These three statements summarize Ellul's Christology. As revealer of God, Jesus Christ is unique and comprehensive. As God himself come in the flesh, Jesus Christ changes everything on earth and in heaven. At the very outset, then, Ellul's proclamation of the Word challenges all theologies which would restrict the importance of Christ to soteriology or to the ethical 'impossible ideal' or whatever.

The incarnation of God in Christ is *the* act of freedom, shattering the forces of bondage and necessity.

For the old relations, foundations, and habits, however, Christ substitutes new ones, those of love and freedom. . . . The new order, that of the Beatitudes, makes life perfectly liveable and possible. It is not even necessary . . . that all men without exception should live according to love and freedom. But this freedom has to be present and incarnate.⁴⁶

Ethics 'flows out of the relationship with Christ'.⁴⁷ The ethics of freedom is rooted in Christ as the free man.

The Gospels clearly show that Christ is the only free man. Free, he chose to keep the law. Free, he chose to live out the will of God. Free, he chose incarnation. Free, he chose to die.⁴⁸

The freedom of Jesus Christ is not that of the sovereign God, for he chooses to be limited by our human situation. His freedom is expressed in relation to this situation, facing all the temptations and tests that we do.⁴⁹

Thus, the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness are signposts and pointers toward true freedom. He faces the temptation of food, which Ellul interprets as representative of all natural necessity (food, sex, material things, etc.), and refuses it although he is hungry. He faces the temptation of power, which Ellul interprets as all types of domination (political, economic, etc.), and refuses it in favour of servanthood. The third temptation is

'spiritual'—to give a proof of his divinity. It is the temptation to be religious, self-assertive, self-righteous, self-saving. A part of the temptation is Satan's use of the scriptural text against God. Again, Jesus refuses to yield. Ellul argues that Jesus' later temptations and struggles are but variations on these three. The 'temptation of Christ' episode is a paradigm for Christian ethics of freedom.

Ellul's discussion of violence further illuminates his understanding of Jesus Christ and his implications. Nonviolence appears to be the orientation which Jesus held.

It seems to witness to the teaching of Jesus on the level of personal relations—Love your enemy, turn the other cheek. Jesus carried the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' to the extreme limit, and in his person manifested non-violence and even nonresistance to evil.⁵⁰

The teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and of Paul in Romans 12 describe this orientation of overcoming evil with good, of violence with nonviolence.⁵¹

Yet, there is a more fundamental explanation for nonviolence. What Christ does is make us free—free to struggle against necessity. Violence, above all, is an expression of the 'order of necessity'. We accept either the order of necessity or the order of freedom in Christ. Acceptance of the latter means that violence must be rejected root and branch. 'Because Christianity is the revelation of the Wholly Other, that action must be different, specific, singular, incommensurable with political or corporate methods of action.'⁵² Jesus Christ requires action in the face of violence (or any other expression of necessity) but action of a different kind.

No matter what subject is under discussion—law, life-style, violence, the city, etc.—it is Jesus Christ who is the focal point in Ellul's message. Jesus Christ reveals most fully and precisely the Word of God. And this Word of God is, above all else, Wholly Other. As a final note on this subject, we observe that there is a distinctively eschatological character to the Incarnation. 'The promise of the glorious return of Jesus Christ, the *Parousia*' means that Christians are not to cling to the past but rather to live in expectation of the *eschaton*, of the 'coming break with this present world'.⁵³ Jesus Christ is the first 'man of the future'.

⁴³ 'Mirror of These Ten Years,' p. 200n.

⁴⁴ *The Will and To Do*, p. 27.

⁴⁵ *Ethics of Freedom*, p. 278.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 52ff.

⁵⁰ *Violence: Reflections From A Christian Perspective* trans. by Cecelia Gaul Kings (New York: Seabury, 1969), p. 9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 148, 157; See *Hope In Time of Abandonment*, pp. 148ff.

⁵³ *Presence of the Kingdom*, p. 49.

His work guarantees the defeat of the rebellious powers and the final victory of God.⁵⁴ Thus, 'all facts acquire their value in light of the coming Kingdom of God, in light of the Judgment, and the Victory of God'.⁵⁵ Jesus Christ brings the future into the present; this task is also given to his followers.

The Word of God and, thus, the message of Jacques Ellul, is above all Jesus Christ. It can also be said, however, that this Word is mediated by Holy Scripture. Thus, Ellul has said:

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. . . .⁵⁶

Ellul's commitment to the importance and authority of Scripture is attested again and again in his writings. Four of his books are explicitly biblical studies. Many passages in his other books and articles include biblical exposition. His own conversion to Christian faith resulted from his private reading of Scripture while a university student.

Like Karl Barth, Ellul differentiates the written text from the living Word of God, but, at the same time, the two are inextricably associated and virtually equivalent. The Holy Spirit activates and empowers the text in correspondence with our decision of faith. The content of the biblical text and the will of God are, in practice, equivalent.

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.⁵⁷

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*.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ See *Ethics of Freedom*, pp. 144ff, *Apocalypse*, p. 88, and 'Karl Barth and Us', p. 24.

⁵⁵ *Presence of the Kingdom*, p. 49.

⁵⁶ *To Will and To Do*, p. 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 274n.

⁵⁸ *Prayer and Modern Man*, trans. by C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1970), p. 104.

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.'⁵⁹ With such an attitude we can 'know the constant surprise of the transition from Scripture to the living word'.⁶⁰ 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'.⁶¹

Scripture is, of course, a book written by people in the historical forms and modes common to their ordinary affairs. This is typical of God's action in human history. He adopts human work and fills it with new significance.⁶² Historical fact, myth, symbolism, prophecy, apocalyptic—God uses these and other literary genres to convey his word. In fact, Ellul argues, God uses the redactors, editors, and compilers of the Bible just as much as the authors of the original bits and pieces. The meaning of a passage is discerned in relation to the whole of which it is a part.

Ellul periodically distances himself from what he terms the 'biblical literalist' who represents 'such antiquated, outmoded, trivial attitudes that they are not even worth mentioning'.⁶³ 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.⁶⁴

The way out of the current crisis is not back to the old and obsolete formulations, but forward and beyond the present situation.

Even more of Ellul's space and energy is devoted to an attack on much of contemporary biblical scholarship—nearly always on the grounds that its passion for historical and literary dissection of the text leaves nothing except a mass of dusty, isolated fragments. This complaint leads us to the heart of Ellul's understanding of Scripture. Scripture 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., for Ellul as he reads Scripture. The original editors and

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁶⁰ *Ethics of Freedom*, p. 125.

⁶¹ *To Will and To Do*, p. 264.

⁶² *Meaning of the City*, p. 176.

⁶³ *Hope In Time of Abandonment*, p. 138n.

⁶⁴ *The Judgement of Jonah*, trans. by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 10.

canonizers were not imbeciles, and they jealously guarded the entrance to the canon. Everything has a point and a meaning.

Ellul's various books and articles repeat these same points over and over again. There is an emphasis on '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'.⁶⁶ This unity is rooted in the Incarnation of the eschatological Son of God, Jesus Christ. Interpretation must be incarnational and eschatological.⁶⁷ Revelation requires the action of the Holy Spirit, on the one hand, and existential commitment on the part of the hearer, on the other.⁶⁸

We have no valid reasons to be arrogant about our 'superior' knowledge as moderns.

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.⁶⁹

The Bible, understood in this fashion, is remarkably modern. 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.⁷⁰

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.⁷¹

Historical criticism is entirely legitimate so long as it is not an end in itself and so long as it is not a means of 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'.⁷²

Ellul's contribution to contemporary theology and ethics can be summarized in three dimensions. First, he has affirmed and demonstrated the *relevance* of the whole canon of Scripture for today. His two studies of Revelation and 2 Kings are prime examples. The book of Revelation is no longer merely an esoteric key to interpret for the purpose of predicting the future. Nor is 2 Kings of interest primarily as a battleground for claims of historical inerrancy. Rather, both books are interpreted and proclaimed as the living Word of God addressing us in our contemporary situation.

Second, Ellul has insisted on the underlying *unity* of biblical revelation. Thus, the doctrine of the fall, the revelation concerning the 'meaning of the city' from Genesis to the book of Revelation, and the biblical cosmology with its principalities and powers are discussed in a way that illuminates a broad unity and consistency that might otherwise have escaped us.

Third, and most importantly, Ellul has argued that biblical revelation and faithful theology must be *centred on Jesus Christ*. The unity of Scripture is above all in Jesus Christ. The difficulties of this approach are well known, and Ellul is occasionally open to charges of having forced his Christological interpretation on various texts, especially by means of typology. Nevertheless, if Christians are followers of Jesus Christ, their Lord must be given central importance in theology and ethics. Limiting the importance of Jesus Christ to his soteriological significance—or interpreting soteriology in only a restricted, personal, or future sense—is challenged by Ellul. It is a challenge needed by Evangelicals as much as Liberals.

Once again, the prophetic significance of Ellul's work lies not only in challenging our intellectual constructs, our dogmatics, but in pressing toward the concrete meaning of faith for life in this era. Three themes which run through Ellul's 'Thus saith the Lord' must be noted here. First, Christians are called upon to engage in a vigorous programme of *desacralizing* and *demythologizing* the gods, idols, and powers of our age.⁷³ This means unmasking the absolutist pretensions of the state and the political order, of reason and technique, indeed of all the factors and forces which are simultaneously worshipped and oppressive. Second, Christians must '*introduce the Wholly Other*' into this closed world of bondage and necessity. They must break open

⁶⁶ *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, p. 142; See *To Will and To Do*, pp. 47-48.

⁶⁷ *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, pp. 172ff.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁶⁹ *False Presence of the Kingdom*, p. 56.

⁷⁰ *The New Demons*, p. 224.

⁷¹ *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, p. 145.

⁷² 'Mirror of These Ten Years,' p. 203.

⁷³ See *The New Demons*, pp. 206-228.

closed situations.⁷³ The one indispensable means of doing this is a radical rootedness in God and in his coming Kingdom. Third, Christians must not only proclaim and think in conformity to the coming Kingdom, they must find ways of *incarnating this in daily life*.⁷⁴ In all three of these aspects, Jesus Christ is the paradigm and example for Ellul. The Gospels and the whole canon of Scripture provide analogies and guides for concrete implementation of this programme.

5. The Future of Evangelical Theology

The point of this essay is that the voluminous work of Jacques Ellul is best (I might even say 'only') understood under the rubric of 'prophecy' in the tradition of Søren Kierkegaard and the ancient prophets of Israel. Those coming to Ellul looking for systematic coherence, careful attention to all

details, or sober academic refinement will be disappointed. Much of the criticism of Ellul's work is well-founded. The point is, however, to be challenged to go beyond him, to do it better. His work raises questions and points toward creative new answers.

If Ellul can provoke Evangelical theologians to get through and beyond the in-house debates over the best terminology to describe the authority and character of Scripture, if he can challenge us to spend less time responding to the agenda of non-Evangelical 'threats' and more time positively articulating the Word on behalf of the church and the world—he will be a successful prophet indeed. If Ellul can provoke Evangelicals to demonstrate 'walk' as well as 'talk'—that is, to develop a style of life incarnating the faith before the world—he will have fulfilled his mission. Ellul may convert you or he may infuriate you. But he must not be ignored.

⁷³ See *False Presence of the Kingdom*, pp. 178ff.

⁷⁴ See *Presence of the Kingdom*, pp. 146ff.