

## ELLUL--Prophet Against Technology

Jacques Ellul, Reformed theologian, historian, jurist, social analyst, author of more than 40 books and 1,500 articles, died of cancer of the lymphatic system at his home in Pessac, France, on May 19 at the age of 82.

Ellul had an eventful life. He became a convinced Christian at the age of 24. At first his theological home was with John Calvin. But in Marxism he discovered what he considered to be a key to the interpretation of developments in modern society. He never did join the Marxist movement. But he did leave the exclusivism of Calvinism and embraced the theology of Karl Barth. The two Karls--Barth and Marx--became the two pillars of his thought.

During World War II he was a leader of the French Resistance and helped Jews escape the Nazis. Immediately after the war he served as adjunct mayor of Bordeaux. From 1943 to 1980 he taught at the University of Bordeaux as a professor of the History and Sociology of Institutions at the Faculty of Law and Economic Sciences. He also taught at Bordeaux's Institute of Political Studies. He was an active member of the Eglise Reformee, both at the national and local levels, participated actively in the World Council of Churches, was involved in environmental projects, and established and directed a pioneer program to help juvenile delinquents.

Ellul was one of the most influential and important Christian thinkers of our time. His best known work, *The Technological Society* (1954), which passed the 100,000 mark in sales, made him popular, particularly in the United States. Ellul was not as well known in France. His works also drew attention in Holland. In 1965 he received an honorary doctorate from the Free University of Amsterdam. Prof. Egbert Schuurman, Calvinist philosopher and senator, interacted with him in his book *Technology and the Future-A Philosophical Challenge* (published in Holland in 1972 under the title *Techniek en toekomst:: Confrontatie met wiisgerige beschouwingen*. The English translation appeared in 1980 published by Wedge Publishing Foundation).

Ellul's critics generally agree that he was better at offering analyses of our modern culture than at providing solutions. His writings were never dull, often apocalyptic, blunt and to the point. He has been a burr in the saddle for both evangelicals and liberals.

Michael Bauman, one of his severest evangelical critics, wrote, "Ellulism--the theology and politics of Jacques Ellul--I am convinced, is seriously defective." Bauman considered him a "leftist radical." But to understand Ellul's approach, his works must be read within the context of modern France. His often drastic statements have repeatedly led to misinterpretation. But in practice, said Joyce Hanks, who interviewed Ellul in the 1980s, seasoned Ellul readers usually develop the habit of mentally toning down many of his statements that seem outlandish on the surface, in order to take his arguments seriously.

## **Ellul on Technology**

Ellul was an outspoken critic of technology. In his book *The Technological Society*, he painted a grim picture and offered little hope for the possibility of renewal and freedom from the effects of technology. He took a stand against technology from his own unique perspective.

His view of modern technology was broad. According to Ellul, modern technology functions as the scientific method of control at work, in ethics, in law, in medicine, in eugenics-in short, wherever people interfere with nature in order to alter it. Modern man thinks that technology has become his salvation and that through it utopia will eventually arrive. Modern societies pin their hope on technology as an answer to their problems. And every problem is viewed as a technical problem which demands a quick and efficient solution. But technology has become a master instead of a servant. It has become a means of controlling things and people. Through it man is being robbed of his freedom. Human beings are being reduced to technological animals or things, unaware of what is happening to them.

Technology is a vehicle of the process of secularization. It threatens man's ability to listen to God. Technology leads to a planned society and while such a society cannot be free, it is nevertheless inevitable because it is efficient.

Ellul believed that autonomous technology behaves like a tyrant transforming culture into a great totalitarian whole. He argued that the state is fully controlled. "The state becomes a machine designed to exploit the means of the nation." He also believed that modern technology makes the world state unavoidable, and that this state will have a totalitarian character.

Ellul argued that "automation" does not result in labour savings favourable to the workers, but leads to unemployment. He believed that the sickness of our technological society cannot be healed. He also maintained that even the positive sides of material technology, such as leisure, hygiene and prosperity, are not worth the effort of having people spending their whole lives pursuing them. As Ellul analyzed the impact of technology upon society he came to some bleak and disturbing conclusions. He saw a decaying world, bent on self destruction. He even claimed that the prevalence of torture in our century is a logical consequence of the West's denial of Christianity. Ellul warned, "I think there is no more dangerous illusion today than the justifying of science and technology by Christians. I am not interdicting or condemning scientific work. I am simply saying that it is open to question, that it does not express a divinely given vocation, that it does not set forth God's glory but effaces His creation. Man views himself as an owner, not a steward. He thinks everything is his."

Technology is the negative. God is the positive. Man can free himself from the tight grip of technology only through a living faith in the God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.

## **Ellul on Politics**

Ellul wrote voluminously about politics. He saw all modern life oriented to politics. Politics has gradually invaded everything. On the one hand politics for Ellul amounted merely to "an honest concrete exercise in administration of management ...it has no spiritual, ideological, or doctrinal content." Politics should be no more than "the best possible management of the affairs of society. On the other hand, the word "politics" for Ellul meant a concern for the tendency to use the power of the state for the purpose of controlling people to the detriment of the freedom of individuals. He said that it is still a fact that "the state will grab as much power as it is allowed to grab."

Technique increasingly determines the nature of politics. In our technological age the tendency of the state is to become absolute in every field. Ellul wrote, "The state is totalitarian, not because of totalitarian doctrines, but because of the vast array of means, e.g., in planning, economic and administrative management, forecasting, investigation, control, research, inquiry, and psychological action." This means, said Ellul, that no present-day authority can claim to be instituted by God, for all authority is set in the framework of a totalitarian state. He saw political power as the domain of Satan.

Ellul left no room for Christian political action. He said that no political position can be justified from the Christian standpoint. He believed that there was no such thing as Christian politics. "Christian principles are supposedly taken from the New Testament." Christians cannot work out a Christian doctrine of the form of government or economy. Scripture has nothing to say on such matters. The state, said Ellul, is not meant to be Christian. It is meant to be secular. He wrote that Jesus nor later his disciples ever engaged in or showed any interest in politics. Jesus even refused to engage in political action. He subjected politics to a kind of ridicule. The Old Testament prophets were not interested in politics either. Ellul stated, "It is a mistake to think that all the prophets are dominated by the problem of social and political justice." And why should Christians attempt to correct the ills of societal structures as perhaps "man's problems are so complicated and so badly put that they are in fact insoluble." Ellul's pessimism shows in his view that the problem of wealth and poverty will never be solved except as it remains unsolved.

Ellul insisted that "all that has to do with politics and political authority belongs to the devil."

If politics is so evil what then can Christians do? Ellul discouraged them from voting. He said, "To vote is to take part in the organization of the false democracy that has been set up forcefully by the middle class. No matter whether one votes for the left or the right, the situation is the same." The only thing a Christian can do is to be a witness for Jesus Christ in the political arena. Ellul commented that "the only specifically Christian point of entering politics is to bear witness and to try to convert men, not in the sense of proselytizing, but because we know that their peace and joy and fulfillment can be granted them only by their conversion to Christ. It is for their sakes and not for the sakes of ourselves or the church that we have to announce the gospel to them."

## Conclusion

As Ellul was a complex thinker and a prolific author, I have been able to discuss only some of his key ideas. I will conclude with a few critical remarks.

Though Ellul belonged to the Reformed family, his thinking was influenced more by Karl Barth than John Calvin. This is seen in his view of revelation where he speaks of God revealing "himself by the fleeting method of the word, and in an appearance of weakness." His use of Scripture shows that he espoused higher criticism (the application of the critical methods to the Bible developed for use in other literary and historical studies). For example, he refers to the creation account of Genesis 1-3 as a "parable."

The complexity and often contradictory nature of his thinking comes through clearly in his espousal of universalism and his simultaneous support for missions. On the one hand he was a strong backer of missions, but on the other hand he believed that all "men are saved by Christ." He wrote, "We may accept a universal salvation which is given by the God of love whether men believe it or not." But why spend time and effort on mission work if everyone is going to be saved anyway?

Ellul's sharp critique of our modern society should be heeded. He warned against dehumanization caused by modern technology, but in doing so he rejected technology as a whole. He regarded the trend of technological development toward an absolute, godless technocracy as unavoidable. Because of his Barthian influenced theology, he was never able to work out a Christian position on technology. Dr. Schuurman rightly observed that Ellul had lost sight of the fact that people ought to lead technological development and correct any wrongly aimed development-in short, that people should act in freedom and responsibility to set the right course.

Ellul did not accept the Lordship of Christ over all of life. He did not integrate life and faith. He privatized the Christian faith, restricting it to church and personal piety. That's why he had no reformational message for our modern society, limiting Christian involvement in politics to prayer and personal witness to Jesus Christ. He could not accept that the Gospel is the salt and the light in all areas-politics, education, economics, technology, etc. He denied that Christians can develop a well-rounded world and life view. In his evaluation of Ellul, Dr. Schuurman countered such thinking: "The Christian faith is a radical and integral, saving and liberating faith. On the basis of that faith, perspectives open for the whole of culture-including technology and scientific method."

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