



## Jacques Ellul

1912 –

This Frenchman's life has continually exemplified the manner in which the gospel frees us from convention and conformity and liberates us for a radical engagement with God and the world. A member of the underground resistance in France during the Nazi occupation, Ellul startled fellow-citizens at war's end by acting as lawyer on behalf of the very collaborators who would have tortured and killed him had they uncovered him during hostilities. The reason he gave was that collaborators were being treated as savagely in peacetime camps as the Nazis had treated wartime resisters. Although an appreciative, life-long student of Marx, he yet repudiated communism: "Under a facade of justice, it is worse than everything which preceded it." A diligent member of ecumenical committees and associations, he laments that national and international councils achieve pathetically little: "this is not at all the equivalent of Pentecost."

His father was a skeptic and his mother a non-churchgoer, yet as a ten year old Ellul came upon the pronouncement of Jesus, "I will make you fishers of men." He spoke of it as a "personal utterance" that "foretold an event." Shunning exhibitionism and therefore loath to publicize the details of his conversion, he nonetheless describes it as "violent" as he fled the God who had revealed himself to him. "I realized that God had spoken, but I didn't want him to have me. I wanted to remain master of my life."

Ellul was born among the dockworker families of Bordeaux. He

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distinguished himself at school. When his family needed money the sixteen year old became a tutor in Latin, French, Greek and German. (His students were only ten years old!) At eighteen he read Karl Marx's major work, *Das Kapital*, and for the rest of his life regarded Marx's analysis of the power of money as more accurate than any other. At the same time, he saw that Marx had nothing to say about the human condition. Revelation alone addresses it. As a result he has found himself unable to eliminate either Marx or Scripture, and has continued to live with this tension.

Ellul claims he has been helped enormously in his discipleship by two soul-fast friends, one an atheist and the other a believer. The militant atheist has kept him honest by showing that Christians have tended to betray precisely what Jesus Christ is and brings. His believer-friend, "a Christian of incredible authenticity," has supported and encouraged him when dispirited. "Every time his apartment door opened upon his smile it was, in my worst moments of distress, like a door opening onto truth and affection."

In the years following the war he continued to lecture in law even as he was appointed Professor of the History and Sociology of Institutions. Through his work in this latter field he has come to realize that technology afflicts twentieth-century life as nothing else does. By technology he does not mean mechanization or automation (he has never suggested that a horse is preferable to an automobile!). Rather, he means the uncritical exaltation of efficiency. If something can be done efficiently, these efficient means will then be deployed without regard for the truth of God or the human good. Illustrations abound. One need only think of the proliferation of abortions in the wake of more efficient abortion-techniques—at the same time, of course, that fertility-enhancement is the cutting edge of medical research!

Ellul has angered many who glibly believe in the inevitability of human progress, and frustrated those same people when they have found him unanswerable. Propaganda, he insists, seduces people into consenting unthinkingly to the exaltation of efficiency; the mass media are the tools of propaganda; and it all creates the illusion that people are free and creative when in fact they are mind-numbingly conformed and enslaved.

Two parallel columns of books have poured from his pen: one, a thorough-going sociological analysis which speaks to secularists

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turned off by pietistic clichés; the other, a biblical exploration for earnest Christians who want to discern the Word of God in its vigour amidst the world's illusions and distresses. *The Technological Society* and *The Meaning of the City* represent the two aspects of his mature thought.

Ellul has always insisted that the self-utterance and "seizure" of the living God frees individuals from their conformity to a world that blinds and binds, even as it renders them useful to God and world on behalf of that kingdom that cannot be shaken. Not surprisingly, Ellul has continued to magnify the place of prayer, contending that as we pray, God fashions a genuine future for humankind. Indeed, God's future is the *only* future, all other "futures" being but a dressed-up repetition of the Fall.

When moved at the bleakness of destitute juvenile delinquents, the university professor befriended and assisted them for years, seeking to render them "positively maladjusted" to their society. He wanted them to be profoundly helpful to it without adopting it. He has urged as much in television interviews, sermons, and the forty books and several hundred articles he has written. In them all he has reflected his most elemental conviction: God's judgment exposes the world's bondage and illusion for what they are, even as God's mercy fashions that new creation which is the ground of radical human hope.

An old man now, Ellul insists the most important thing about him is his witness to Jesus Christ. "Perhaps through my words or my writing, someone met this saviour, the only one, the unique one, beside whom all human projects are childishness; then, if this has happened, I will be fulfilled, and for that, glory to God alone."

