

"Activist and Ethicist : Meet Jacques Ellul" by David W. Gill (1976)

Review essay on Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976)

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ALTHOUGH Jacques Ellul's academic training and his teaching at the University of Bordeaux have been in law, sociology, and history, he has long been concerned with the shape of Christian behavior as much as with the shape of the world. Christians are commanded by God to be very much *in* the world. Yet, by virtue of their relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, they are to be distinctly *not of* the world. This role demands, on the one hand, realism regarding the character of the world, and on the other hand, knowledge of and obedience to the Word of God.

Over the past thirty years, Ellul's reputation has been most broadly established through his studies in sociological "realism," especially *The Technological Society*, *The Political Illusion*, and *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (all three available in Vintage paperback editions). At the same time, however, he has published a steady stream of biblical, theological, and ethical studies. His latest, *The Ethics of Freedom* (Eerdmans, 517 pp., \$13.50) is by far the largest and most important Christian "answer" to the situation of the world that Ellul has yet made. It is the first "main volume" of his projected series on Christian ethics.

All of Ellul's work is interrelated, but four earlier volumes are of particular importance as anticipations of *The Ethics of Freedom*. Two of these are the early works *The Theological Foundation of Law* (1946; English translation 1960) and *The Presence of the Kingdom* (1948; English, 1967). More important, for its discussion of the relation between hope and freedom, is *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (1972; English, 1973). Finally, there is *To Will and To Do: An Ethical Research For Christians* (1964; English, 1969).

To Will and To Do is formally connected to *The Ethics of Freedom* as it is the "first half of the first volume" that is to be the *Introduction* to Ellul's ethics. *To Will and To Do* deals with the origin and character of the various "moralities of the world" and shows their relation to biblical Christian ethics. The second half of the *Introduction*, as yet unpublished, will "sketch the conditions which a Christian ethics should fulfil and . . . outline the

problem of social ethics" (*The Ethics of Freedom*, p. 7). The three "main volumes" are planned around the Pauline "theological virtues" of faith, hope, and love. The "ethics of freedom" corresponds to "hope" and has been published first because Ellul believes that hope and its partner freedom are the site of the decisive conflict in our era. Eventually, Ellul plans to publish an "ethics of holiness" corresponding to "faith" and an "ethics of relationship" corresponding to "love."

In his introductory comments to *The Ethics of Freedom*, Ellul argues that *hope* is man's response to God's work for him, above all in Jesus Christ. It is not mere emotion but a "way of living." *Freedom*, then, is God's gift to us in response to our hope. But freedom is not to be reduced to a matter of independent, autonomous man's making choices; rather, it is a life of discipleship to Jesus Christ going *beyond* the confines of the world's options. It is "the coming of something new into the world with a creative adherence to an inexhaustible good" (p. 11).

The Ethics of Freedom is divided into four sections. In Part I, "Alienated Man and Liberation in Christ," Ellul describes the determining and conditioning forces making this a world of "necessity" and "alienation" (in the Marxian sense: alienation from the self, from work, and the like). He adds that this is another way of saying that man is sinful and in bondage. From within this situation man is indeed without hope. However, God has been incarnated in Jesus Christ. The Word of God has decisively broken the powers that bind and lead to death. This is above all true in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but the "temptation of Jesus" episode is also given as a paradigmatic example of the true, revolutionary freedom of Jesus.

Thanks only to Jesus Christ, we too have the possibility of redemption from our bondage. In fact, Ellul argues, it is only in relation to bondage that freedom really takes on its meaning. Via the cross of Christ, the fatality, necessity, and alienation of the world open up to an inspiring vision of hope and freedom. In a most interesting discussion Ellul digresses to treat the "problem" of the Christian claim to a monopoly of true freedom. Notwithstanding the historic unfreedom of the Church, Ellul makes a ringing declaration of the uniqueness and centrality of Jesus Christ for freedom.

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In Part II, "The Object of Freedom and the Will of Man," Ellul gives a long and valuable exposition of freedom. Freedom is a "power" and a "possibility," the "climate" and "situation" of the whole Christian life. Ellul endorses Barth's description of "freedom for service of God" and then develops freedom in relation to the self, the "powers," and revelation.

This last section, "freedom in relation to revelation," gives the fullest expression yet of Ellul's view of Scripture. It has, in my opinion, two outstanding merits. (1) It is a thoughtful, stimulating meditation on revelation and hermeneutics that will contribute to our own discussions of this critical area. (2) It is a demonstration of how a very "high" view of Scripture can arise out of an ecclesiastical and theological environment quite different from what Americans have lived in. Ellul steps on both fundamentalist and "new hermeneutic" toes, but he is unquestionably on the side of those who read Scripture as the authoritative Word of God.

Ellul then practices his exegesis on the Pauline statement, "All things are lawful, but not all things edify" (I Cor. 10:23). The first half of that statement is a manifesto showing the incredible breadth of our freedom. The second half, however, shows us again that true freedom is always of the twofold orientation toward love of neighbor and the glory of God—an orientation and a guide to freedom that Ellul states repeatedly throughout the work.

In Part III Ellul discusses "The Assumption of Freedom." It is essential, he argues, that Christians take on ("assume") and incarnate their freedom. Freedom is not a kind of *opus operatum* imposed by God. It is essential, and not just for our own life; it is also essential for the world that there be present a people living out Christian freedom. We assume that freedom by *recognition* (of our alienation, of our liberation in Christ) and then by *action*. Ellul warns against the perils of falling again into bondage as we assume our freedom—bondage to law or morality, to the flesh or cultural approval, to the pursuit of "happiness."

Part IV, "Implicated Freedom," is the longest section of the book. Ellul discusses the meaning of our calling as "pilgrims and strangers" and the importance of recognizing our priorities of evangelism, mission (defined as "presence"), and mediation (i.e., acting as agents of

reconciliation). In our living out of these roles, "dialogue and encounter" are the first steps of freedom. Then, as our realism has established the forms and limits of the world, our freedom will be expressed in "transgression," "risk," and "contradiction." The law of liberty and the command of God lead us to transgress and desacralize the world's idols. We live out the "risk" of trusting in God rather than the world's various securities. Again, though, this is far from capriciousness or situationism and iconoclasm for their own sake. The glory of God and love of neighbor are necessarily served by these acts of freedom in obedience or else the acts are illegitimate. Jesus and the Scriptures furnish us with the paradigms.

There follows a series of discussions of "concrete implications" for political life, freedom movements in the world, religious freedom, work and money, marriage, sex, and family. Each is a worthy addition to the literature on the subject. Aside from the discussion of freedom in relation to revelation, mentioned earlier, the most provocative discussion in the book will be, I suspect, the one in which Ellul argues for a kind of strategic anarchism in Christian political behavior. Given the monolithic totalitarian-tending state apparatus (East and West), Ellul suggests that a form of anarchist strategy is the only one radical enough to challenge and open up the system. He does not exclude other forms of action, of course, nor is he suggesting anarchism as a total solution or as a dogma. Read before reacting!

It is tempting to say that the content of the first 368 pages of *The Ethics of Freedom* could have been more coherently presented in half the space! That, however, would not be "Ellul" any longer. Ellul's style is to approach his points first from one path, then another, then another. This makes for some apparent repetition, but the total result is the creation of a thorough, impressive case. So it is no accident, and ultimately no failing, that we must go through 368 pages of discussion of freedom before getting 150 pages of concrete implications! The latter are often hard to appreciate without the former.

The Eerdmans publishing house and translator G. W. Bromiley are to be thanked for making this very large volume available to us. For a second printing, such a large and important work deserves the addition of a good subject index and a complete bibliography of works

cited. And in both text and notes the references to secondary literature, including Ellul's own, are often sloppily and inconsistently given; these should be improved.

In general terms, it will be noted that Ellul intends his ethics to be *realistic, biblical, Christocentric, and eschatological*. We have already noted the stress on realism and on Scripture. There will be disagreement as to just how realistic and how biblical he has really been, but even if not all are won over to his positions, all will be challenged. Further, this is a Christocentric ethic: everything is based on Jesus Christ, in whom we have hope and faith and from whom we receive freedom and guidance. Finally, this is an eschatological ethic: Christian behavior is inflected toward the future much more than the past. It is the coming Kingdom of God that shapes Christian behavior, not axioms deduced from "orders of Creation," the Mosaic Law, or Thomistic natural law (to give only three examples). All four of these aspects come together in a constant emphasis on the radical tension between Christ and culture. Just as the Incarnation was unique, unconditioned, specific, free, loving, and glorifying to God, so also should be Christian behavior by virtue of our life in Christ.

Another way of describing the total thrust of *The Ethics of Freedom*, and of 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 justifications, 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 neighbor. "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.

If there is one larger "weakness" in *The Ethics of Freedom*, I believe it is the slim role given the "Church," understood as the body of believers. We will have to wait for the remaining volumes of Ellul's ethics before making a final judgment, of course, and my own suspicion is that

the ethics of holiness and relationship will remedy this weakness to some extent. To date, however, including *The Ethics of Freedom*, 99 per cent of Ellul's ethics focuses on (1) the monolithic, collective forces of our society, and (2) the individual (in a very obvious appreciation of Kierkegaard).

On the one hand we have those collective forces and structures of our society, made the more ominous by the "powers" connected to them; on the other hand we have "God and the individual disciple," the last line of resistance to the technological society. Ellul does protect himself against one kind of objection by saying that Christian ethics is "individualistic" but *not private*, i.e., our behavior has a social referent, love of the neighbor (p. 210). However, "social transformation" by Christians comes only "by the accumulation of a vast number of individual decisions" (p. 478).

When Ellul mentions the Church, it is usually in condemnation of its lack of freedom, its bureaucratization, its institutional *rigor mortis*, and so on. Now it is not to be denied that the ideology of our era is overwhelmingly collectivist and destructive of the individual: Ellul is right in radically resisting this. It is just as true that the institutional church must be wary of conforming to these sociological trends. And it must be noted, in fairness, that there are scattered references to the Church along the lines of which I speak. The Church is important in Ellul's discussion of hermeneutics, for example. And in his most positive statement by far: "It is on the basis of a church which is a strong body and community that this [living out of freedom] is possible for the layman" (p. 298).

My point is that much more could be, and needs to be, said about the role of the "body of Christ." After all, the New Testament envisions believers never as isolated individuals per se but as "individual members of a body, whose head is Christ." And while the collective structures and forces of our society have "powers" active in them, the body of Christ has the "power of the Holy Spirit." The presence of God's Spirit is not merely an individual matter, nor the accumulation of "individual presences" when we gather together. Further, New Testament social ethics makes a distinction between "love of neighbor" and "love of the brethren"; both are essential, but they are not strictly identical. I am saying not that Ellul denies this but that it is the least developed aspect of his ethics. This is the point at which I believe an Anabaptist conscience has most to say to brother Kierkegaard and his Danish Lutheran experience and to brother Ellul and his French Reformed experience!

At any rate, *The Ethics of Freedom* is a brilliant and welcome contribution to Christian ethics. It will challenge both activist and ethicist to be less conformed to the world and to be transformed toward the image of Christ. It should also be a challenge to American evangelicals to begin to produce creative, substantive, and faithful work in the area of ethics, especially social ethics. For where among us is there anything comparable to the work and general importance of Ellul? □