

The Best Kind of Mentor

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I have often referred to Jacques Ellul as “my mentor” -- which can be defined as “a wise and trusted, usually senior, teacher, counselor, supporter, and guide.” Certainly he was, and in many ways still is, the person who has most fully played those roles in my career for the past forty-plus years. My father and three or four others were also wonderful mentors but in terms of my thought and action, the trajectory of my life and work, Ellul has first place.

As a Berkeley undergraduate in the late Sixties I had heard of Jacques Ellul but it was in Fall 1971 that the journey really began when I reviewed *Meaning of the City* for a small Berkeley radical Christian tabloid. The next summer I published a piece on politics that drew deeply on *Political Illusion*, *Politics of God*, *Politics of Man*, *Presence of the Kingdom*, and *False Presence of the Kingdom*. I was totally hooked and rapidly acquired and devoured everything I could find by Ellul.

In fall 1972 I decided on a whim to send my reviews and essays to “Prof. Jacques Ellul, University of Bordeaux, France.” Two months later I was shocked to get a hand-written, encouraging letter from Ellul himself. From 1972 to 1982 I exchanged numerous letters with him, read everything I could find, learned to read French, and wrote a PhD dissertation on *The Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul* at the University of Southern California. What fascinated me was his dialectic of sociological criticism and theological-ethical reflection. Life between the two has been my passion and calling ever since.

In summer 1982 I made my first visit to Bordeaux and published my interviews with him. He welcomed me back for a whole sabbatical year in 1984 – 85 when I finally got my French to a serviceable level and met with him at his home for a couple hours at least twice a month. I returned for periods of two to four weeks during several subsequent summers. On the day he died, May 19, 1994, I truly felt the ache of losing a father in my life.

There is almost nothing I have taught or written over the past forty years that is not influenced by Ellul. My biblical studies, such as *Peter the Rock: Extraordinary Insights from an Ordinary Man* (1986; Ellul read my manuscript and gave me encouraging feedback in 1985 while I was meeting with him), are in my view “Ellul-style” commentaries. His ethical works such as *To Will and To Do* and *The Ethics of Freedom* have, of course, been huge influences. My *Becoming Good: Building Moral Character* (2000) interacts a good deal with Ellul on faith and hope.

The reality is that I disagree(d) regularly with Ellul --for example, concerning work and vocation, Satan and the Devil, ethics and morality, and kingdom of God and kingdom of heaven. But this is where he stands out as a mentor: he welcomed disagreement so long as it was thoughtful. He loved stimulating his students to renewed thinking, to pushing farther down the line. He often said that he didn’t want (mindless) acolytes and followers. He welcomed difference and healthy intellectual combat. He was the most learned, brilliant person I have ever known, always with layers of knowledge deeper than I had visited --- but he humbly, gently, joyfully welcomed disagreement and argument.

There is not one book that Ellul wrote that didn’t challenge me and push me to think better and research more deeply the matter at hand. To me, that is one of his greatest legacies. This is why I can’t identify just one book or idea to preserve and pass on: we need it all.

And, secondly, I love the diversity we have in our community of Ellul scholars. It is a tribute to Ellul himself that we consist of atheists alongside believers, anarchists alongside socialists, all ages, races, both genders, all nations, academics, craftsmen, artists, and laborers. At our recent colloquia in both Bordeaux and Wheaton both the radical diversity and the mutual respect and even love were palpable. Like Ellul we want to be fearlessly committed to the search for truth and reality, for hope and freedom in a world closing in on itself. And we want to respect and enjoy each other along the way.