

## Jacques Ellul on Vocation & the Ethics of the Workplace (1982 Interview & Commentary by David W. Gill) (1994)

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Jacques Ellul died on May 19, 1994, at his home in Pessac, France, near the University of Bordeaux where he served as professor of the history and sociology of institutions in the Faculty of Law and Economic Sciences from 1946 to 1980.

Though blessed by vigorous health throughout his life, Ellul had been bothered by heart problems over the past decade and, more seriously, by lymphatic cancer in the past two years. He died at home in the presence of his children, Jean, Yves, and Dominique. Another son, Simon, died in 1947 at the age of six. Jacques Ellul's wife, Yvette, to whom he had been married for 54 years, died in April 1991. It is ironic that just as C. S. Lewis's death on November 22, 1963, was overshadowed by that of John F. Kennedy, so was Jacques Ellul's death on May 19, 1994, overshadowed by that of Jacqueline Kennedy.

For me, May 19 has always been significant because it was the birthday of Malcolm X, the African-American social prophet who woke me up to the depths of America's sin of racism. Now it also marks the end of the earthly life of another of the 20th century's most important prophetic voices.

Jacques Ellul leaves behind him a legacy of social analysis and prophetic theology matched by very few in the 20th century. He is best known for his critical analysis of



David Gill with Jacques Ellul, 1984

the impact of technology on modern life—not just by the introduction of various machines but, more profoundly, by subtly changing our way of thinking and valuing. In our technical milieu, rationality, measurable effectiveness, quantification, and standardization are replacing God, goodness, tradition, eccentricity, and the like, at great human and spiritual cost. This social analysis unfolded in more than 30 volumes, the best known of which is *The Technological Society* (original French edition, 1954; English translation, 1964), which passed the 100,000 mark in sales several years ago.

Ellul was also an active lay theologian in the Reformed Church of France. He has written some 30 books on Biblical topics, Christian ethics, and the relationship of the church to the world, including *The Presence of the Kingdom*, *The Meaning of the City*, and *The Ethics of Freedom*. Ellul's theological and ethical work was a Biblically oriented, Kierkegaardian/ Barthian challenge to a Christendom that he

viewed as being too conformed to the world. His work stressed the ways that God broke through the fatality, violence, and closure of situations described in the Bible (above all, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ)—along with the call of God to a similarly radical presence by Christians in today's world. For Ellul, Christian discipleship is characterized by freedom and hope, faith and love.

Ellul's legacy is impressive for its sheer size, scope, depth, and breadth. He engaged the political Left and Right, Marxists and capitalists, religious and nonreligious, theological liberals and conservatives, with an impact matched by few others. His positions on the technological threat, political inutility, strategic anarchism, and theological universalism caused some summarily to reject his work. Others, however, found his work on these and other subjects a brilliant challenge to re-think some of their major assumptions and conclusions, even if in the end they didn't agree precisely with all of Ellul's proposals.

Jacques Ellul's life was distinguished by its combination of activism with thought. He was fired from his first university post for protesting the Nazi occupation of Vichy France. He worked in the French Resistance during WWII and in the Bordeaux mayor's administration immediately after the

war. He volunteered for years in a ministry to street gangs and alienated youth. He worked hard to prevent the destruction of the South Atlantic coast of France by real estate developers. He was active in the earliest years of the World Council of Churches, and in denominational as well as parish leadership for the French Reformed Church. His written criticism could sting, but his personal demeanor was unfailingly gracious and kind to a steady stream of students, colleagues, parishioners, and neighbors.

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I had heard of Ellul in the '60s but my first real taste of his thought came with *The Meaning of the City*, which I read as Sharon Gallagher and I prepared an issue of *Radix* on Christianity and the urban challenge for November 1971. In early 1972 I read four more of his books on politics and Christian discipleship as part of my preparation to go (with my *Radix* press pass!) to the Democratic convention in Miami in July. I was hooked. His analyses of contemporary politics and his grasp of the radical demands of Christian faith were by far the most illuminating I had ever read. On a whim I sent him some of my reviews and articles on his work. I was surprised to receive a handwritten letter from him thanking and encouraging me in my efforts.

That was the beginning of a long relationship not just with his ideas and writings but with the author himself. I exchanged many letters with him and visited him in Bordeaux during the summers of 1982, 1988, and 1991, as well as nearly every Friday afternoon from July 1984 to June 1985 when I spent a sabbatical year in Bordeaux. I have known many brilliant thinkers, but Jacques Ellul is easily the greatest genius of them all. His learning was vast and his insight was unmatched. Yet I found him to be invariably humble, gentle, unpretentious, and full of integrity and humor. The world became a poorer place on May 19, 1994, with the

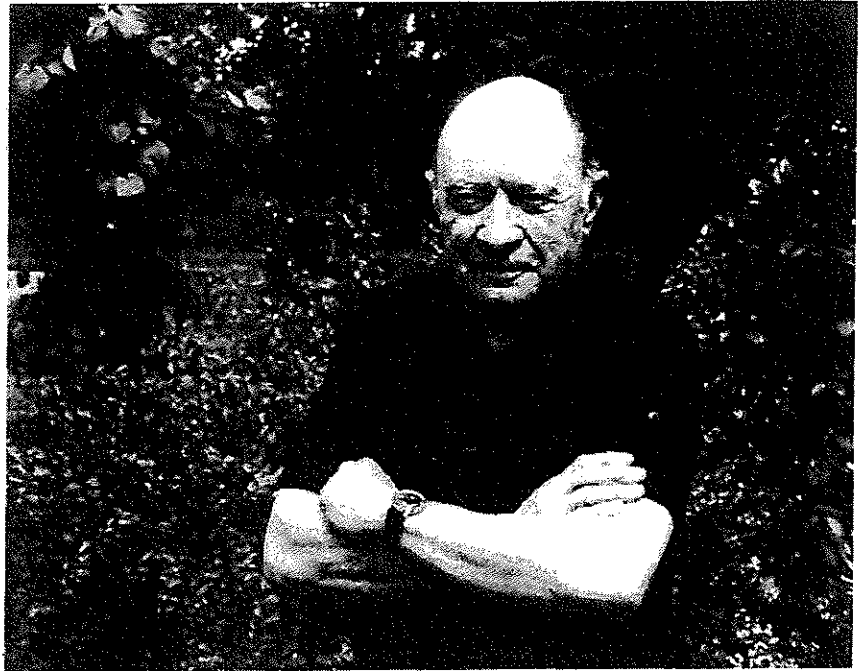


photo by Woody Minor (1988)

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passing of this great man of God.

The conversation that follows was recorded in the summer of 1982 at Ellul's home in Pessac. I continue to think that our philosophy/theology of work is strongest when it is rooted in the Biblical themes of Creation and Redemption as well as in the realism of the Fall (which was Ellul's main thrust). While I agree with Ellul that work and vocation are often two different experiences for people, I would still urge us to do everything we can to reintegrate our *work* (paid or unpaid) into a profound sense of *vocation*. (in the sense that it is a response to a *calling from God* and the people) and of *profession* (in the sense that it is undertaken with a *declaration to God* and the people that we are committed to service, quality, community, accountability, and high ethical standards). Nonetheless, it is Ellul's realism that cautions against the degeneration of my ideals into blind idealism.

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#### Interview

**David Gill:** Let me ask a question about the application of your ethics to work and calling. A friend of mine who is a professor of English literature at the University of California has discovered your books recently. He wonders how, specifically, your being a Christian has made a difference in your being a professor at Bordeaux. I have had difficulty in responding to him because you have said that your work has been that of professor but your calling has been the activity with troubled young people at the Prevention Club. Yet both he and I read your other statements about the Christian life being one life. So what does it mean to be a Christian professor or a Christian lawyer or a Christian nurse?

**Jacques Ellul:** No matter where we are placed, there is not any one answer. I would like to respond on two different levels. My friend Jean Bosc and I started the Associations of Protestant Professionals. We dis-

cussed professional problems, concretely, just as they are in life. The theologians would simply describe what the Bible says, without spelling out what the professional should do. That way they were challenged to figure out what to do, what sort of solution to bring to those problems. We had some very different experiences. It was easier for doctors and nurses than for business people. The groups that never went along very well were those composed of bankers and insurance agents.

The other level on which I would respond has to do with my experience as a professor. When I became a professor, I discovered very quickly that the meaning of my work lay not in the science of transmitting information but in my relationship to my students. As in the case with my Bible studies, my university students inspired me to undertake research on various questions. I did not do research for the sake of research but because a group of students was interested in a particular question.

It is important for me that my students know that I am a Christian. I have very often lived the experience described by Peter: "Be ready always to give a reason." I believe that students should always feel free to speak up and ask questions. When, for example, I taught classes on the thought of Marx and his successors, I didn't try to teach that Marx was wrong. Marx said some admirable things and I told my students that this was so. It was amusing to me, then, that students would often ask me "How can you teach this when you are a Christian?" Thus, I would be given an opportunity to respond. I also felt that it was important to be available to my students. I had a close pastoral relationship with many of them.

Gill: Isn't this really just the pedagogy of Jesus? Treating students as human beings?

Ellul: For me that was very important, especially in times of hardship and crisis in the university such as

the 1968 student revolts.

Gill: Jesus frequently taught by the method of raising questions.

Ellul: Yes, and this is often done in seminaries. But when you have 1,000 students in an auditorium at the university it is more difficult.

Gill: Let me come back again to the matter of a radical distinction between work and calling. Isn't there a sense in which everything has a work aspect to it—for example, even your work with the Prevention Club? And can't everything become a kind of calling if you receive it as such and treat it as a calling from God? If you can't see your activity or work as some sort of calling, should you get out if it, if possible?

Ellul: I think that such a distinction can apply in this sense. I think also of a young educator who worked with the delinquents of the Prevention Club. He said that when he worked for eight hours during the day he often did it for the pay. But when he continued on after hours because he loved them and they needed him, then he became free and his activities became a calling. It is not always exactly like this, but many people engaged in difficult work have this kind of experience.

Gill: If I have a nuclear engineer study with me, I would emphasize to that student the importance of being questioned by God and that if he cannot offer his nuclear engineering as service to the kingdom of God he should consider changing jobs. Or she should, if it's a woman. Of course that raises many problems, such as our considerable ability to rationalize and justify ourselves.

Ellul: Whether one's work can be to the glory of God or not is an important question.

Gill: A worker may have no community to support him or her in such an examination and in a change of profession—and that

might create great difficulties for a family dependent on this person's salary. I agree with the point you have often made that it is irresponsible to advise someone to make a change when you personally are not burdened with the consequences—or are unwilling and unable to share in the implications of the change.

Ellul: Surely. And this all presupposes that one is able to put, in common with others, one's life experiences before God.

Gill: Are you still convinced that a Biblical view of work must begin with the doctrine of the Fall rather than with the creation?

Ellul: It is a very classical idea that work existed in the creation, but it was work in a very different sense there. That is, the work in Genesis 1 and 2 was nonutilitarian. All the trees gave their fruit spontaneously, and although Adam was commissioned to watch over the garden there were not any enemies there. Thus it was a good work, a job, but one that was not in the domain of necessity. That is the great difference for me.

Gill: But the toil, sweat, and resistance that came with the Fall did not eliminate the importance of the fact that we are made in the image of God—a God who worked for six days and then rested. God's work was creative and very good. Can't we say then, as much as possible, that our work ought to be creative, for life, resulting in products that are very good?

Ellul: Yes, but I don't think you can say that for God the creation was a job or work. The Greeks and Babylonians always considered creation an effort. But the Bible says that it was the word of creation rather than a work. It was something more simple. I agree with you that God's act was creative and that what responds in us is word and work. There is a work command, but Adam and Eve were then in the presence of God rather than having

merely a work or vocation. The idea of work and vocation is always confusing, but I believe that vocation or calling is always, and only, service to God.

Gill: I think you are right to warn about the idolization and sacralization of work. Certainly it is a luxury available only to the few to be able to choose their work freely. At the same time, though, shouldn't we encourage people to bring their work as much as possible into closer conformity with their calling from God? Sometimes your writings have seemed to dismiss the possibility of service to God.

Ellul: I would not have worked so much myself if I had not been convinced that work does respond to a certain will of God and not only to a necessity of the world! The difficulty comes, as you have rightly said, in that it is necessary to appreciate a job in the measure to which it is creative and liberating. I agree with the Reformed tradition in refusing to make a simple distinction between work that is good and work that is not good. I have a new group forming in Paris, composed of bankers and stockbrokers. They are Christians. Can I tell them that a Christian should not be a stockbroker? It is very difficult to do.

Gill: When Peter visited Cornelius he directed his attention to Jesus Christ and left him as a Roman centurion. He could do that with confidence because he brought him to the Lord. It wasn't long, though, before, most of the Christian Corneliuses in the pre-Constantinian church left their commissions, convinced that this kind of work was not in accord with the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It seems that it is enough to help Christians to bring together their recognition of Jesus as Savior with Jesus as Lord of the whole life, and then be patient about what happens as bankers and stockbrokers begin to allow God to question and guide them.

Ellul: Yes, I totally agree. But the problem remains that various tech-

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niques are used in different jobs and it is very difficult to judge accurately and fairly whether the work is to the glory of God, whether it is creative and liberating or not. It is very, very difficult.

Gill: I think a further requirement today is to gather examples of alternatives. Often people don't change because they lack creativity. We need to gather alternative ideas to stimulate creativity on how things might be done differently. For example, E. F. Schumacher's book, *Small Is Beautiful*, has some marvelous examples of alternatives ways of running a business.

Ellul: Yes, I'm very much in agreement on the need to invent alternatives. That is one of the most positive things we can do now. I have never met Schumacher but I am quite familiar with his writings. A good deal of his effectiveness comes from the fact that he is an economist writing about his own field and experience. It is lay Christians who should be challenged to work through these questions and come up with alternatives.

Gill: As far as lawyers are concerned, your approach implies that groups of Christians in law gather together for a realistic analysis of their profession and practice, then engage in a thorough study of Biblical notions of justice and law, and finally begin to pray and discuss together what all of this means for their law practices.

Ellul: Exactly. The first point is very important, especially for lawyers since they are tempted by idealism. It is well and good to serve the law but they must un-

derstand the reality of what is happening.

Just last month there was a tragic example of that. A young man struck his daughter who then fell on the sidewalk and became crippled and blind as a result of a spinal injury. The prosecuting attorney was a Christian. I know all three of them well. The father had a bit of a temper, but was a very good fellow, sensitive, and devastated by this accident. But the press portrayed him as an unworthy scandalous father. The prosecutor was appalling and the defending lawyer had no concrete defense. The young man was sentenced to 17 years in prison and hanged himself the next day. I told the lawyers afterward, "You did not truly judge the person in this matter." The reality of the situation and the responsibility of the legal profession: both are very important to stress.

Gill: In America, it seems that most lawyers, including Christians, are simply manipulating the technical requirements of the legal code.

Ellul: That is true in France as well.

Gill: The good news in America is that the Christian Legal Society has launched justice centers to explore such questions, and they have begun a conciliation service to help people resolve disputes outside the court system.

Ellul: We have thought about trying something like that in France, but people are just too busy. It takes time to counsel and to reconcile situations. Before I became a professor I worked some as an arbitrator in business affairs, and that kind of mediation still occurs in general business circles. But we  
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**Ellul** *continued*

have not established a specifically Christian organization for it either for business or law.

**Gill:** I would like to hear more about your experiences with the Associations of Protestant Professionals. How long did they last? What exactly did they do?

**Ellul:** Most of the associations lasted six years, from 1947 to 1953. Problems were submitted by the participants. We tried to get them to reflect on practical problems. There were congresses, study courses, and consultations. A businessman, for example, might submit a business venture for study and discussion by the group. Two groups, doctors and teachers, continue on to the present day, but the others ended.

**Gill:** We have not yet discussed the blue-collar laboring classes. Can we hope that theologically and ethically better-trained professionals might go back to their churches and teach a Christian view of work and discipleship to the workers who worship with them?

**Ellul:** Yes, I think that is very right. For workers, Christianity has appeared at other times to be either a means to get them to accept their condition or a means of criticizing society. I believe that the latter is very important and that some new associations of workers might be created, since American labor unions are not at all in the business of transforming society. I think it is important to have Christian associations that ponder and reflect on changes in society.

**Gill:** My impression is that there may be many more working-class Christians in the United States than in Europe, for example, in the Pentecostal churches.

**Ellul:** Yes, but there are many workers in the Catholic church in France. They have two labor unions. One of these is totally conformist. But the other (the CFTD,

Confederation Francaise Democratique de Travail) is anxious to confront the real problems of our society. While they have dropped the name Christian from their title, all the directors and the majority of members are Christian and they are concerned about the real problems.

In France, the problem is that the workers are alienated, though not in the usual sense and not because of lack of money. It is because they realize more and more that their life has no meaning. The well-paid workers I know are asking, "What is the meaning of life?" ■

*—David W. Gill is professor of applied ethics, North Park College, Chicago. He is the author of The Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul (Scarecrow Press, 1984) and of many articles and reviews of Ellul's work. Those interested in remaining posted on work by and about Jacques Ellul and the issues he addressed may contact The Ellul Forum, Department of Religious Studies, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL 33620. The interview was edited from a conversation that took place in 1982 and was translated by Lucia L. Gill.*