

## Living Faith: *Revelation and Religion in the Thinking of Jacques Ellul*

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A tumultuous season of geo-political change, the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw global wars and the near constant threat of nuclear obliteration create an uneasy atmosphere for politicians, scientists, artists, academics, and the general public alike. During this time, French historian and professor, Jacques Ellul [1912 – 1994] was thinking, writing, and teaching about the external forces contributing to social unrest. Much of his attention focused on the uncritical acceptance of technology, particularly in the expanding use of metrics, assessment strategies, and machine-driven methods that were gaining rapid prominence over human intellect and function. The magnitude of this dynamic is something he referred to as *la technique*, an over-arching, sociological force that expands with exponential magnitude as irrational trust in the promise of progress through machine technologies and technological methods increases. Technique does not stay neatly sequestered in small boxes labeled ‘Politics’ or the ‘Economy;’ it pervades all institutions, Christianity included. The steady rumbling of technique is not unlike that of an underground tremor that shakes the earth above; its rippling effect can be devastating. Its fixation on methods and means promise (and often produce) greater efficiencies in all areas it touches, but because of that pursuit, eventually it eclipses the basic, organic functionality of human beings and all of the values inherent therein. In particular, Ellul focused on the way societal institutions appropriate the force of technique for the benefit of efficiency, co-opting what is uniquely human. When carefully examining the structure and practice of his faith, it is clear that Ellul’s ideas concerning technique make room for its penetration into all institutions including education, science, marriage *and* the church. It is the triumph of techniques and the totalitarian spirit of the age that has deeply wounded the church. This understanding deeply informed the

way Ellul practiced his faith. It is an idea to which we will soon turn. To start, however, it is important to note that throughout Ellul's corpus, whether the sociological track or the theological writings, the emphasis is often on power. Power, its use and abuse, is foundational to the way Ellul understands the workings of society as well as the way he apprehends and understands Christianity. The conflation of power with strength and success is an idea he takes great pains to contest, therein creating an important underpinning to all that he knows and believes.

Ellul was a Christian and an anarchist – a duality that some may find counterintuitive, even impossible, but early Marxist leanings and a Christian faith that was based more on following the Jesus of the Bible than it was following the precepts and traditions of the church, made an impact on all he wrote and taught. In the following we hear undertones of his own reckoning with the life of Jesus: He writes, “What constantly marked the life of Jesus was in every situation, the choice **not to use power**. Not using power is not weakness. Weakness means inability to do what I would like to do or ought to do. Not using power is a choice. I can, but I will not. It is renunciation”.<sup>1</sup> Although he taught non-violence, Ellul was not a complete pacifist. As he explains in his book *What I Believe*, his decision to renounce the manipulative use of power was general but power “does not rule out occasional acts of violence. But this violence is an expression of brutal conflict, whereas the non-use of power is a permanent orientation in every choice and circumstance. Power is there, but one refuses to use it. This is the example set by Jesus.”<sup>2</sup> This paper addresses the way Ellul practiced his Christian faith, its applicability and outworking in society and in the local church, as well as in the development of his personal and public ethics. First, Ellul's orienting posture: *faith*.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellul, *What I Believe*, p 149

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pp 149-151

The way Jacques Ellul practiced his faith was informed by belief in the Bible's historicity of an actual Jesus Christ, --the man from Nazareth who lived, died, and made an ongoing and transformative impact on the world nearly 2000 years ago. One of the most significant things one can say about the faith of Jacques Ellul is that it was *living*. His faith was not neatly sequestered and kept in a box called 'Sunday;' he applied his faith to everyday life. From the first words in dedication of his book, *Living Faith*, we read that his hope was that his grandchildren would one day, "encounter Jesus Christ in this book, in fellowship with their grandfather" (1983). Much more than mere intellectual assent, Ellul practiced his faith with authenticity and purpose. He decried the gap between **religious** belief and transcendent faith, one that is based on God's **revelation** of Himself through Jesus Christ. He sought always to inspire his readers onto a faith in God that was genuine and applicable to everyday living.

For Ellul, faith is quite a different thing from belief. Belief is about certainty. Faith is more than belief because belief can exist as a matter of simple intellectual affirmation. Faith is more than such cognitive assent; it involves doubt. Rather than "knowing for sure," faith is a matter of stepping up *in spite of* uncertainty. One who has faith is one who *necessarily* doubts, for faith is not faith if one is certain. Where one chooses to place one's faith is an act of will --a stepping into a commitment, *in spite of* doubts. An example of this is the marriage commitment. Many (if not all) young lovers approach their weddings with some measure of doubt. Will I love him always? Can she satisfy my desires for my whole life? Will we truly be better together than a part? These doubts are not often quelled by the time of the ceremony, but they are put away and a step of faith is made -- a pledge to honor, to love, and to stand together. In many ways, this is similar to Ellul's understanding of commitment to Christ. There may be beliefs that he cannot reconcile with, but there is enough evidence to allow him to take a *step* of faith. Essentially,

then, faith is not a noun; it is not a thing or an object. Rather, faith is a verb. It is a way of being in the world.

Ellul's doubts are similar to the doubts of many other people who would like to believe in God but maintain that they cannot because there is no proof. Ellul's doubts are impossible to quell. They stem from the long history of Christianity, the moral lapses of Christians throughout the ages, and the ideological insistence of doctrinal correctness that has divided believers into numerous subsets and niche practices. He also has doubts about whether he can walk closely with God and live out his faith in everyday life, but his commitment to doing so is where faith kicks in, the outworking of which is seen in both within his actions in the church and outside of it. As David Gill points out, the French title of Ellul's book, *Living Faith* expresses this idea with greater clarity<sup>3</sup>. In his native tongue the title reads, *La Foi au prix de Doute* – Faith at the price of doubt (*p 103 footnote*). Thus, foundationally –even before the Gospel's central call to love— faith is the key to an authentic Christian life, the essential element being that it must be lived. Love – true love –is impossible to do well without faith. He explains:

The individual must apply his or her faith to the daily necessities and problems of life, not merely assent to a list of regulations or law. And, yet – belief is important. He explains: “whatever the greatness of science, no one has ever been able to live in that harsh, austere climate, in the rarefied air of abstract experience and anonymous codes. From the most casual conversation to the most intimate relationship, everything depends upon that confidence-*faith that gives rest to the soul and joy in the presence of others*”<sup>4</sup>(italics mine). For Ellul, faith is the engine of the Christian life, and its implications are many.

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<sup>3</sup>Gill, David W. *Doing Good: Building Moral Character*. IVP Books. 2000. p103 ff

<sup>4</sup> Ellul, *Living Faith*. P. 21

## CHURCH

Placing faith in God through Jesus Christ means that one's faith is more than a personal or private matter; it is part of a larger narrative – and that is the story of the Church. All of God's purposes, no matter how they unfold, happen through the church, for it is through the gathered group of Christians in each locale that the Kingdom of God is seen on the earth, vis-à-vis “the Body of Christ.” This concept of the church is not synonymous with the Church as institution.<sup>5</sup> Rather, it is within the gathering of the group of local body of believers [hereafter known as *the church*] that the fullness of Ellul's understanding of the Gospel takes place. The church is absolutely integral to his faith and is perhaps most vividly depicted in several of his books, namely *The Presence of the Kingdom*, *the False Presence of the Kingdom*, *The Meaning of the City*, and *The Subversion of Christianity*. It is in the church that the life of Christ is seen. This is where –and how—the goods associated with discipleship happen; social cohesion, identity formation, and community ethics are formed within the dialectical necessity of the church as safe harbor and the church as it stands in agonistic opposition to the world.

Ellul's understanding of the church is more of a description than a definition. That said, the church is definitively local. Its role in society is tremendously significant, not only for those endeavoring to follow Jesus Christ, but essentially – for others. The main purpose of the church is to function as

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<sup>5</sup> Lower case “c” refers to the local assembly no matter the denomination or expression of the church. Capital “C” refers to the institution known globally as “the Church.”

. . . a ‘sign’ of the reality of God’s action; [A Christian is, *sic*] a sheep in the midst of wolves, [...which is, *sic*] why it is essential that Christians should be very careful **not to be** wolves in the spiritual sense – that is, people who try to dominate others” (pp 4-5). As a gathered people, the church functions as a living witness of sacrifice, -- the sacrifice of Christ and its outworking in the midst of life together. Herein, the church occupies a very important place in the world, one that does not strive to live a life informed by “rules, principles, or slogans,” but lives by a distinctly Christian ethic that is rooted **in Christ, himself.**<sup>6</sup>

Today, there is no doubt that the perception of religious faith (even in Christian circles) is all too commonly viewed as a matter of obeying laws and rules under threat of judgment and condemnation. Fear and guilt rule. Institutional and doctrinal conflicts divide people of such ‘faith.’ In stark contrast, Ellul develops a view of faith from his understanding of scripture. This faith is lived out in relationship to God as a response to His revelation, not human religion. This is key, and is threaded throughout all of his theological works. Although he does not consider the book theology, *The Presence of the Kingdom* is one of the most accessible of these; it is the book in which the role of the church might best be perceived. In it Ellul discusses at length what he calls, “the situation of the Christian in the world,” an ongoing conundrum that finds its application in numerous ways throughout the centuries. What is this conundrum? To start, it involves individual recognition that the Christian is actually living in two worlds; one, the world of means and techniques, a world in which capitulation to structures of power and organizational efficiency is mandatory if one wants to survive, and the other, a spiritual life of transcendence in the midst of the material world; that is, an existence in which the Christian fully engages in life but recognizes its temporal nature. The

“Christian belongs to two Cities. He is in the world, and he has a social life. He is the citizen of a nation; he has a place in a family; [. . .] all that he does in this world, he ought to do seriously, because he is bound up with the life of other people, [but, *sic*] he cannot

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<sup>6</sup> Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 1989, p.12.

wholly belong to this world; For him this world can only be a ‘tabernacle’ (2 Peter 1:13), in which he is a ‘stranger and a pilgrim’ (Heb. 11:13). For him it is a temporary situation, although extremely important, because he belongs to another city. He derives his thought from another source. He has another Master.”<sup>7</sup>

The Christian’s goal is to pursue a life in what Paul the apostle terms, “in Christ.”<sup>8</sup> Pursuit of this life “in Christ” involves wrangling with this tension rather than acquiescing to a universe of means. This tension is dialectical, one that necessitates the ability (and willingness) to deal with the challenges faced as an active participant in this world while simultaneously understanding that there is a higher calling – a citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven. By no means does this infer that the church is to remove itself from the everyday affairs of society because “Christians are not meant to live together in closed groups, refusing to mix with other people. The Christian community must never be a closed body or an ethereal idea. Indeed, the church “should not have a discarnate life.”<sup>9</sup> Rather, this quandary involves the ability to hold in tension the many aspects of what might be called ‘dual citizenship,’ maintaining one’s integrity in institutional participation while walking in the freedom from slavery to the world of materialism and means.

Freedom does not infer license to act irresponsibly. What this freedom means is that being called by Christ is a call to love that is necessarily a call to be *in relation*. This is a key part of the historical freedom afforded to those who follow Christ and the inherent responsibility they carry toward ‘the other’ for “[. . .] the man who is called by Christ is [called upon to love. To

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<sup>7</sup> Ellul, *Presence* p 33.

<sup>8</sup> This phrase is used 164 times in the epistles. The numerous times this phrase is used in the New Testament make it almost an invisible term, yet Ellul takes it very seriously and puts it in the center of the normal Christian life.

<sup>9</sup> Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, p 270

love means not to be able to think of oneself in isolation but only in relation to others.”<sup>10</sup> The call to love is nothing new. It begins with the relationships within the church but does not end within its walls. “Because all Christians are called upon to love, there is (or should be) between them a unique reciprocity and rapport with which no other in the whole world can be compared, namely, that of love. And because they stand in this relation, because there is this unlimited mutual love of which the only other instance is the love of Jesus Christ, there thus exists a common reality which is the church. It is a human grouping. This means that every decision of a Christian also engages the whole body and has repercussions on all society.”<sup>11</sup>

The centrality of the Gospel message *is* love and is summed up in what has been called, ‘the greatest commandment’ in which Jesus answered those raising the question of commandments. The Gospel of Mark records Jesus’ words: “Love God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment that is greater.”<sup>12</sup> All the talk of love begs the question: If this higher love is so central, why does the Church always falter and exhibit so many instances where love is not the motivating force? This is a challenging concept to understand, which is why one must return to the matter of the subversion of the Gospel message.

### **False Christianity**

One of Ellul’s main complaints about Christianity is that it has been for centuries subverted. That is, it has been involved in campaigns of violence and power, far removed from the message of love that is so central to the Gospel. In fact, the presence of the kingdom is necessary for both the Christian and those who do not follow precisely because human beings are

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. *Ethics*, p 270

<sup>11</sup> Ellul, *Ethics*, p 270.

<sup>12</sup> Mark 12:30-31



bound to self-interest and self-aggrandizement which lead to wars, violence, and the destruction of human dignity. The church is needed to set the tone for civility and to practice non-violence. For Ellul, then, true faith must be practiced in a type of Christianity that might be called “revolutionary”, one that emphasizes the transcendent presence of God in the world and does not get swept up into alliance with politics, religion, or any other human system or institution. Instead of setting in stone a false system of hierarchical positioning and carrot-on-a-stick morality, revolutionary Christianity is a way of being in the world that is distinctively mutual, embedded in the community of faith, thoughtful, and serious about its identification with Jesus Christ as Head, Shepherd, and Master.

It is clear that by describing the faith as “revolutionary,” Ellul does not intend to ignite a physical revolt against the government, nor does he imply that the situation of the Christian in the world necessitates becoming a “culture warrior” or warrior of any sort.<sup>13</sup> Instead, he likens the place of both the Christian and the church in the world to what he terms the “revolutionist position.” suggesting it is vastly different from conformists in the past or in the present. To be a revolutionary, Ellul explains, is not the normal course of history; it involves an individual deciding not to follow the beaten path, but to exercise free will in such a way that “he pits against all the constraints and conventions which surround him.”<sup>14</sup> For the Christian, this position is an act of “superhuman effort for the sake of a hope which is beyond himself,” a position that confronts tacit religious thought with the reality of a living, indwelling God who is active in the world.<sup>15</sup> How is this superhuman? Why is it a challenge? What is challenging about this

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<sup>13</sup> Some 21<sup>st</sup> century pundits have taken to using this term as a means to express the need to return to more clear-cut traditional values. Others, theologians and opinion leaders such as Andy Crouch, Charles Colson, and others have framed the need for such a return as a fight or war to redeem culture. See details at: [http://www.culture-making.com/about/andy\\_crouch/](http://www.culture-making.com/about/andy_crouch/) and “About us” at <http://www.breakpoint.org/about-bp>.

<sup>14</sup> Ellul, *Presence*. 1989. p. 30

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 29

interpretation of the Gospel is that it is sacrificial; it advances from a posture of weakness, identifying with the suffering of Christ rather than the power of the state. It is a scandalous message, in fact, if one agrees that “truly the spirit of power lies deep in the human heart.”<sup>16</sup> Because the Gospel message has so long been subverted, in spite of the mammoth good it has accomplished in Western civilization, Christianity has historically taken on shade and is often represented by a superficial moralistic philosophy that is based on fear and punishment rather than love. This falsity is at work in the abstract and in the particular. Instead of letting the Gospel speak through the loving community as it serves its neighbors, churches often revert to propagandistic measures to cajole and encourage compliance. Institutions take pains to preserve, and in such measures create rules, missions, bylaws and fortresses that protect themselves more than the weak. Certainly, this does not happen in every local church across all denominations, but it happens enough to falsely project the core message of Jesus Christ, which is love.

## **Propaganda**

Propaganda and Christianity have a long history together. The repetitive use of symbols, signs, and artifacts are dotted throughout history, but the earliest –perhaps most message-altering one –is that which took place in the early church when Constantine decided that Christianity would no longer be illegal. When the fourth century Roman emperor used the cross of Christ as a military flag to symbolize victory for his army he set in motion a propaganda machine the influence of which the world has since rarely seen. Instead of external oppression, Christians would now be free to worship openly. Undoubtedly, the let up on persecution was welcome, but the results included a move away from the organic familial flow of life in the Body of Christ

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<sup>16</sup> Ellul, *Subversion*. p 166

toward greater organization that was increasingly mandated from the growing layers of institutional authority.

Up until that time the cross signified Christ's death and resurrection, for it was the means by which he died. With the new Emperor's mandate, the cross became the symbol of a war and government; a cross on the breastplate meant power –political power. Originally the cross symbolized "Salvation by attesting to the love of God going even to death for us. It has this meaning and no other. It cannot possibly be a sign of military victory. Above all, it cannot be a sign given by a powerful political leader. What the cross signifies is the weakness and humility of God."<sup>17</sup> And thus the fourth century saw Christianity take a subversive turn as Constantine came into power. Although it did enable a measure of freedom in the marketplace, the Emperor's new-found faith pulled against the freshness of freedom to worship God in ways that the early Christian had come to enjoy. In many ways it limited freedom. Whether Constantine's conversion was authentic or not, conflation of the Christian message with that of the state marked a great change in the history of the faith -- in the way it functions, the way it is perceived, and the actual message of the Gospel. Constantine's use of propaganda began the merging the victory over sin and death with victory over one's military rivals. This set the tone for hundreds of years of misunderstanding, corruption and misappropriation of the power of God. For centuries thereafter political power and the power of the Gospel got tangled up. Christians began to build a new empire, one that did not always resemble the mission and message proclaimed by Jesus. Instead of responding to the ongoing revelation of God through Christ, the Church fortified itself with the bricks and mortar from the world's blueprints for success. Revelation was replaced with religion. Religion protected itself in the Name of God.

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<sup>17</sup> Ellul, *Subversion*. 1986. p 123

Once Constantine's political campaign was underway, the revelatory action of God is turned upside down. Here, in the Emperor's vision, the Kingdom of Jesus is all about attaining dominance. "Instead of underscoring the scriptures call for "no earthly kingdom, Constantine's actions and reign taught the church the opposite message, that . . . The Kingdom of Jesus is of this world. It has to be set up by political power. It has to be installed by a military victory. [. . . ] A political and propaganda campaign is now underway. But the result is disaster for the church and the faith."<sup>18</sup>

Since that time, the church has often been co-opted to advance military power, but there are many other ways power has been utilize in the Name of Christ. This is the false presence of the kingdom of God.<sup>19</sup> While concerted strategies to evoke compliance and conformity are nothing new, today's extensive use of media techniques within the church allows the proliferation of messaging that is immediate, repetitive, and often straddled with an agenda that is designed to create compliance and quantitative growth. This can occur in numerous and devastating ways, sometimes through force as it occurred in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when countless Lutherans were burned at the stake by mandate of Sir Thomas More, whose religious fervor revealed a narrow ideology of compliance to papist sensibilities.

Propagandistic techniques can take the form of psychological pressure, as well. It is seen in many religious groups that shame or excommunicate its members for lack of adherence to a policy. This is evident in the shunning rituals exacted by groups such as Jehovah Witnesses, the Amish, and the Church of Scientology, to name a few.<sup>20</sup> When members do not comply with dress code or unspoken group protocol, threat of banishment is what keeps them in line. Much

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<sup>18</sup> Ellul, *Subversion*. p123

<sup>19</sup> Ellul, *The False Presence of the Kingdom*.

<sup>20</sup> Baldas,Tresa. March 18.2018. Detroit Free Press,

damage has been levied in the name of such conformity, particularly when it comes to religious ideals. Insistence on conformity through behavior and belief been particularly problematic for the efficacy and health of the church because (aside from dis-regard for the well being of another) as the church is busy in perfecting its methods, its ends disappear. Life in the church becomes a matter of means, and rather than flourishing as a community, relationships dwindle and love fades. That is when true power and purposes of God become subverted. That is when the transformative revelation of God's love becomes dead religion. Ellul bemoans this as he writes, "Christianity has become a religion of conformity, of integration into the social body. It has come to be regarded as useful for social cohesion (the exact opposite of what it is in its sources and truth)." <sup>21</sup> Thus, non-conformity is a necessary element if the church is to be the church authentically. The "good news" is that in spite of the falsity and wrong directions associated with power, Ellul is hopeful about change. He is adamant about the need for the church to step up and recover what has been lost, "for if Christians do not do this work, they cannot have any hope for all that concerns their attitude in the society or political world; all that they will be able to do there will be puerile, useless, and out of date at the present day" <sup>22</sup>. He gives no "ready made solutions" but points to "the layman as part of the way to recover the true values of the Gospel – faith, hope, love, mercy.

To understand the connection of the word to Ellul's ethics of freedom one must understand how propaganda works. One must also understand that although such techniques *may* be used for good or for evil, propaganda can also be noxious. When steadily employed, propaganda twists the perception –and ultimately the soul— of human beings and erodes personal freedom. This, it does, first incrementally and then with utter dissolution. Ellul

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<sup>21</sup> Ellul, *Subversion*. p. 133

<sup>22</sup> Ellul, *Presence*. p 112

explains that “all propaganda action, which tends to make man act without even being aware of his actions and aware he has chosen, destroys in itself justice and good.”<sup>23</sup> Propaganda uses social and symbolic mechanisms that work to change belief or attitudes in a particular population by messing with people’s psychological health, evoking more of an emotional response than a rational one. Institutions are notorious for this. Whether the government, family, education or religious systems, institutional mandates come in the form of colorful posters, iconography, house rules, and even non-verbal communication such as giving someone the “silent treatment” to sway behavior. As information that is shared (or disseminated) to influence people or sell an idea through monologic dissemination, propaganda becomes effective through use of repetition, half-truths, context-less information, and scare tactics. More than simple “spreading of news” is the factor of motive. Propaganda involves moving others toward accomplishing a particular end, such as purchasing a new car or voting for a particular candidate. It can also involve selling an idea, such as the promise of prosperity, peace, success, or purpose. This is the bread and butter of the advertising industry, and makes sense because the goal of marketing agents is to increase the number of buyers and what they spend.

Propaganda is about money and power, but it is not to be the same in the church. In the church, among those endeavoring to follow Christ, the efficacy of “the word” rules; the goal is love and wholeness.<sup>24</sup> Propaganda is a shortcut to move toward a goal, but when the goal is love and wholeness, freedom is required; word is necessary. What has happened in many churches over the millennia is that when the goal is a godly one, it becomes easier to rationalize the means of getting there. It easier to truncate the process of discussion and move toward finding ‘the

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<sup>23</sup> Ellul, 2006 “The Ethics of Propaganda,” *Ellul Forum* p. 3 Issue 37; Spring

<sup>24</sup> Love and wholeness is another way to understand the New Testament of salvation. Why did Jesus come? What message did he bring? The tenth chapter of the John’s gospel narrative records Jesus clearly saying, “I come that you might have life, and that more abundantly.” Here, Jesus is speaking about life eternal as well as life in the here and now.

most efficient means' of funding important projects rather than working slowly through dialogue.<sup>25</sup> Thus, a discussion of Ellul and the Bible would not be complete without taking a closer look at –and considering the vast significance of –the word.

## WORD

A discussion of *the Word* is important on multiple levels, all of which are connected. As the diverse threads of Ellul's beliefs begin to entwine, one begins to perceive the immense value placed on the word for both the individual and in the ongoing stature of the church in the world. This is particularly so as it relates to the connection between community and ethics. To start, the “word” underpins everything, for Ellul's faith is not based on his own postulations; it is based on “what was spoken” –the word. He explains the depth of its importance:

...I myself have been gripped by the unique and irreplaceable character of the word, but for very different reasons [than other scholars of language and discourse, *sic*]: because God created the word, because he has **revealed** himself uniquely by his Word, because the incarnate Word is the Word of the eternal God, because the God in whom I believe *is* Word. Hence every human word is for me decisive and irreplaceable.<sup>26</sup>

Several distinct but interrelated aspects of the word initially come into play here. To begin, Genesis records the place of the word in the creation of the world: “God said, ‘let there be light, and there was light’.”<sup>27</sup> God created the earth by speaking it into existence and then endowed human beings with the ability to speak, creating us with ability akin to his own. This is what is meant by the *Imago Dei*; human beings created in *God's image*. Here, the power of the word is evident, and is also connected with Jesus Christ, who is referred to throughout the New Testament as “the Word becoming flesh,” or “the living Word.” Because humans are created in

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<sup>25</sup> Some examples of the many “good” and worthy goals that have been accomplished by the church throughout history include introducing the concept of hospitals, soup kitchens, educational institutions, etc. These have all certainly not been the result of propaganda. That said, propaganda is often employed in the way of marketing campaigns, fund-raising, etc.

<sup>26</sup> Ellul, *What I Believe*, p 23

<sup>27</sup> Genesis 1:3 NIV

the image of God, it is there – in him, and through the word –that we “find ourselves.” Thus, the word is intimately connected to credibility, which leads to its next major aspect.

The word *is* truth.<sup>28</sup> Ellul frames this idea by saying that the word is of “the order of truth; [it, *sic*] is the creator, founder and producer of truth.”<sup>29</sup> How so? The word makes room for human freedom because of choice. “Language always involves the exercise of freedom. It is never mechanical . . . [. . .] the word remains because it is a call to freedom [. . .] It is, *sic*] an affirmation of my person, since I m the one speaking, and it is born at the same times as the faint belief, aspiration, or conviction of liberty. The two are born together, and language is a sign bearing witness to my freedom and calling the other person to freedom as well.”<sup>30</sup> Propaganda does not allow for this. The word is not only is integrally involved in meaning-making but it mitigates against propaganda for “authentic language is of necessity debatable, and therefore unobtrusive, even when a person is speaking from extremely strong conviction.”<sup>31</sup>

One may argue that the tangible artifacts of culture such as film and photography have a more accessible approach to meaning-making than the word, but it is the fragility and fleetingness of the word, spoken and shared, that is effectively more potent. Ellul explains: “An image can be properly used to illustrate the history of the church for us, but it will never tell us what the church is. For example, the illusion of an image cannot enable us to grasp the deep and true life of the church – the body of Christ. An image cannot even express the visible church, except for outward acts and stereotyped forms, which are always false impressions of the visible church.”<sup>32</sup> Instead, the church is seen by the purposeful participation of a life shared with each

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<sup>28</sup> John 14:6 Jesus proclaims “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

<sup>29</sup> Ellul, *Humiliation* p. 23

<sup>30</sup> Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*. 1985. p 24

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p 30



other –one that advances human freedom and dignity. It is a living picture not found in icons, images or ritual, but discovered in an active, living faith, for images neither adequately express the relationship one can have with God nor do they facilitate the mystery of creation and God’s presence in the world. In fact, for Ellul, images distract and turn attention *away* from the inexplicable and unknown. This factor is perhaps the key difference between the graven image warned against in the Law, and the Garden Image of *Imago Dei*. Vision vs. ear. Tangible vs. ineffable.

Regularly Ellul returns to the necessity of finding God and our truest self is the fleetingness of the incarnate word. The mystery of the word is an integral part of the process of understanding who we are. He writes,

God is a God incognito who does not manifest in great organ music or sublime ceremonies but who hides in the surprising face of the poor, in suffering (as in Jesus Christ), in the neighbor I meet, in fragility. We need to lay hold again of the elementary truth that God reveals God’s self by **the fleeting method of the word**, and in an appearance of weakness, because everything would be shattered if God revealed Himself in power and glory and absoluteness, for nothing can contain God or tolerate God’s Presence. God cannot be known directly but only through that which is within the realm of human possibilities.<sup>33</sup>

This may be why although the Christian faith continues to expand in the earth, its credibility has suffered. Its reputation has been sorely debased as the message disseminates via mass media, and now the image-based medium of the Internet. The theological track of his writings is mostly concerned with the use of the word in church culture, while his sociological works track the way the word is used and abused in the wider culture. Ellul’s sense of the imperative nature of the word extends and expands to the very purpose of human life. In it we are able to perceive the life’s connectedness, because the word “contributes to the elucidation of

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<sup>33</sup> Ellul, *What I Believe*, pp 148-149 – trans. Geoffrey W. Bromily, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans

the meaning of life.”<sup>34</sup> Because the word is linked to truth, we must guard it and use it wisely. He explains that: “...every word ought to carry the meaning that God has given to life (even though it may never refer to God). It ought to carry joy, hope, forgiveness, love, reconciliation, light, and peace in the order of truth.”<sup>35</sup>

Another important aspect of the spoken word is its value in relational matters. Whether interpersonal, small group dynamics, or community relations, “speech fills the infinite gap that separates us.”<sup>36</sup> Language produces the connotations and overtones that are utterly necessary for meaning-making.<sup>37</sup> Without it, there is little clarity. It is in the tension between knowing and not knowing, certainty and doubt, right and wrong – these, and more, do not make Ellul a relativist, but one who values the good, and is willing to take a risk in dialogic exchange with the unknown other. It is this power of the word that creates space for people to relate to one another.

Further, the word evokes intimacy. The word helps build deep human relationships – friendships and affiliations that go beyond superficiality. Word makes true community possible. Communication ethicist Clifford Christians says it well: “. . . language is the marrow of community, the public agent through which our identity is realized. Persons are displayed, made accessible, nurtured, and integrated into social units through symbol, myth, and metaphor.”<sup>38</sup> In full flower, language is a bridge of sorts – one that helps two individual souls come together in communion. This coming together has never been easily defined and has been the source of countless stories. Despite the many economic, political, and geographic reasons people share lives in close communion, the inexplicability of love and friendship remain at the center of it all,

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<sup>34</sup> Ellul, *What I Believe*. p 24

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p 24

<sup>36</sup> Ellul, *Humiliation*. pp 16-21

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p 18

<sup>38</sup> Christians, Clifford. 1998, p. 4

and the word is the mediator between one person's interior and another's. It [language, *sic*] "never belongs to the order of evident things. It is a continuous movement between hiding and revealing. It makes the play in human relationships something even more fine and complex than it would be without language."<sup>39</sup> One person discloses a bit of who they are on the inside and the other follows. Something is shared that creates vulnerability and the other hides. Love is grown-up hide and seek! In many ways this dynamic of revealing/concealing is similar to that which God does in the earth. It, too, is an example of the dialectical tension involved in discovery of truth. God revealing Himself through creation, human relationships, and ultimately through Christ, creates a situation in which those desiring truth must seek it. Those longing to know God must seek Him.<sup>40</sup>

While the word is not the panacea for all human problems, it is a human distinction. "We are above all speaking beings."<sup>41</sup> The spoken word guards our humanness, particularly as the steady stream of artificial intelligence assumes so many of the communicational functions of life. This is particularly so as the word forms on the lips of the speaker. Voice is a gift from God that is shared from one's interior. Words, gliding into space on the breath of the speaker come charging into one's personal space, beckoning to be heard, enjoining the other to lean in and make meaning together. Telling a story in "our own words" helps build credibility, for the integrity of our humanness is a felt presence through the embodied word. Some theorists of the spoken word such as Walter J. Ong, see oral storytelling as a direct appeal to character. His essay on "Voice as Summons for Belief: Literature, Faith, and the Divided Self" in 1958 makes

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<sup>39</sup> Ellul, *Humiliation*. pp. 16-22

<sup>40</sup> Hebrews 1:1-3 "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, [2](#) but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. [3](#)The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven."

<sup>41</sup> Ellul, *What I believe*, 23

a direct connection between voice and ethos. This is one of the reasons why political speeches and religious sermons are so effective to persuade; rhetoric appeals to character. These contribute to Ellul's argument for the efficacy of the word.

For the strength and credibility of the church, the word must operate more fluently than in sermonic rhetoric. Again and again, Ellul returns to the Socratic Method as a way to spur the critical dialogue necessary to maintain human freedom, and it is no less necessary in the church. In fact, it may be said that all of his writings – both social theory and theological -- were undertaken with the purpose of stirring up critical dialogue and analysis. Daniel B. Clendenin in the 1989 edition of *Presence of the Kingdom* explains Ellul's approach as that of the "Socratic gadfly who helps people to shake off the perils of deadly slumber and gain new levels of critical awareness, his works are a 'call to the sleeper to awake.'"<sup>42</sup>

Finally, we come back to the start. The presence of the Kingdom of God is apprehended through the word. Yes, the declaration of the word, vis-à-vis the message, is essential, but there is more. God's presence is discovered in the word –the spoken exchange between two human beings. If I understand him correctly, Ellul is saying that God incarnates Himself in His creation as we speak – using words – to make meaning. God, the meaning-making, purposeful Creator who does not create life in randomness, speaks the world and all that is in it into reality, all the while enduing the same gift to humans. Through the word, then, interpersonal relationship develops and culture is created.

Many consider Ellul's theological work prophetic. Others interpret his departure from rigid tradition too radical and imply his anarchist tendencies are outside the realm of orthodoxy.

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<sup>42</sup> 1989, *Presence*, xxx-xxxii

Essentially this is because Ellul's faith did not find its root in traditional praxis *or* in exegetical rigidity. His interpretation of scripture was profoundly historical and understood only in context of the culture in which it was written rather than the doctrinal biases of the various flavors of Christendom. His faith stemmed from a belief that the God of the Bible can be trusted to lead the People who choose to follow Him and that although individuals, these followers are called into community. Rather than blindly trusting in the institutions that have grown up around the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Ellul's faith was premised on the belief that God **reveals** Himself to His creation through the word, through nature, and through human interaction. And so, the key to the French philosopher's belief seems to be found in the difference between a **revelatory faith** and the prescriptive **legislation of religion**. Ultimately, religious zeal crowds itself into an ideological box. It becomes stagnate and staid. Revelation allows truth to be applicable to every era and every culture. It foists the believer into the discomfort of always questioning, seeking, and growing. Learning to live by revelation rather than the prescriptive of religion diminishes the false power and ideologies that place an all-powerful God in a box of human perception. This sounds like a healthy idea, but it is not one that is often welcome or palatable. This is especially so in light of the human propensity toward certainty, for revelation demands a certain

“renunciation – the renunciation of illusions, of historic hopes, of references to our own abilities or numbers or sense of justice. [. . .] Trust in no human means, for God will provide (we cannot say where, when, or how). Have confidence in his Word and not in a rational program. Enter on a way on which you will gradually find answers but with no guaranteed substance.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ellul, *Subversion*. p 172

In considering some ways in which Ellul's very practical faith might apply to the religious climate of today's church one might begin perhaps with a renewed reverence for the word. Preference for dialogue over sermonic monologue in the local church has the potential to recover and renew the Gospel message in its original focus. Creating a culture of participation in which "the equal priesthood" of all believers is upheld rather than upholding strict hierarchical structures is essential.<sup>44</sup> To "be" the Body of Christ, mutuality in the church is a must. Fostering such a culture of participation will likely increase the church's potency and true power in the earth through dialogue, non-conformity and a recovery of the values of first-century Christianity. The need for what one might call an 'ethics of mutuality' is imperative in the church, for as Christians (1997) notes, "our mutual humanity is energized by moral obligations that activate our conscience toward the bondedness we share inescapably with others."<sup>45</sup> The bondedness involves more than mutual responsibility; it stands on the mutual respect and dignity for each member of the community. These are not the only steps necessary to affect recovery of a living faith and true Christian community, but when they are upheld, the principle of utility has diminished ability to replace love, dignity, and freedom with *la technique's* drive for efficiency.

Finally, as mentioned in the introduction to this paper, the entire body of Ellul's work is premised upon the run-a-way rhythm of technique and its churning pace of efficiency. Because technique expands and corrodes human function, emphasis on the spoken word both to cultivate a participatory culture in the church and expand its use to proclaim the Gospel message may be the best starting point. The word, exchanged in truth and deep relationship in the community, may be the only antidote for a runaway propagandizing of the Gospel message.

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<sup>44</sup> 1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. NIV

<sup>45</sup> p.12.

Ultimately, a **goal toward more genuine and open dialogue** engenders hope instead of despair. Ellulian **ethics center on human freedom** and are fundamentally established by the word, its use and its prominence. The perceived or actual lack of dialogue may be one of the main reasons so many churches in America are dying. In the last decade the U.S. Census Bureau reports that a startling number of churches are closing. Each year, approximately 4000 shutter their doors compared to the 1000 being planted (Wellman, 2013). Right alongside these data, new polling information indicates that there are approximately 31 million professing Christians who have stopped going to church altogether (Packard, 2015). “The Dones,” as they have recently been referred to, maintain a strong belief in God and in the key doctrines of the Christian faith, but they are deeply disillusioned with the over-organized, institutional church and feel that they no longer need to attend a local congregation.<sup>46</sup> This group lists a number of varying reasons for their disenfranchisement, and have been described generally as the “Christian unaffiliated.”<sup>47</sup> However, this descriptor does not tell the whole story. The surprising rise and continued growth of this demographic cannot be causally linked to the closing of church buildings, but numerous other factors, including busier lifestyles, disappointment with the church hierarchy, a paltry preaching of issues peripheral to the faith, spiritual abuse, and the lack of participatory culture all come into the equation.<sup>48</sup> Researchers studying this group cite the lack of participation, with many churches asking for more than they give. Many of *the Dones* describe their experience as simple “burn-out.” They suggest that too many churches are “more soul-sapping than they are spiritually nurturing.”<sup>49</sup> Factors other than lack of authenticity may contribute to this trend as well, such as the rise of global social networks that satisfy a felt need

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<sup>46</sup> Packard, 2015; Jacobsen, 2016

<sup>47</sup> Sandlin, 2014

<sup>48</sup> Wayne Jacobsen’s work *The Dones* outlines these reasons. He, along with others such as Frank Viola and Robert Sweet (*Pagan Christianity*), Jon Zens (*Jesus is Family*), and multiple other authors across all denominational lines cite data surrounding trends in church behavior and religion in the last decade.

<sup>49</sup> Sandlin, 2014.

for connection and technologies that enable a virtual church experience. Some of these online connections have enriched the lives of Christians, but have simultaneously diminished the intensity and benefits of the community found in the local expression of the church. When one's faith is worked out mainly in sharing text messages, emails, and images via screens, encouragement and inspiration may take place, but the chance for **true discipleship** to occur is quite dim.

For the digital natives – those who are growing up with a cell phone or iPad in their hand – Ellul's move toward individual and group interaction in the close community of the church may be the thing that instills renewed engagement in the church. Millennials have already made a mark in the social sphere, re-arranging more than the furniture in Corporate America. They are re-inventing the way the world does business, educates, and finds love. In the church, they are looking for connections that can be made quickly and are “authentic,” rather than based on tired rituals that ask them to obey instead of understand.<sup>50</sup> This is where Ellul's program is in line with what has occurred since the electronic revolution. Instead of a top-heavy religious event or roster of legal regulations, today's young Christians want a faith that goes against the grain. As hyper-individualists, GenZ and their millennial big sisters and brothers not only do not want to conform, but are not conforming to the world's way or ideas. In many ways, they are zealous nonconformists, and for this reason may be ready to recover Christianity in its truest, most primitive state to become the non-violent revolutionaries and activists Ellul envisioned.

Finally, because a God who is alive in the earth is at the center of his faith, there is an active flow in the faith of Jacques Ellul. One might even say that a river runs through it. His faith emanated from its source in Christ to many tributaries and streams, stirring up ideas and

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<sup>50</sup> There are several watchwords among millenials. Three begin with an 'A.' Amazing, awesome, and authenticity.



insights that would never be possible if drawn from a stagnating body of water. And so, although I've have just scratched the surface of his faith and its implications, hopefully the ideas of this brilliant French thinker will stir up and enliven a vigorous conversation – an ongoing dialogue that will work toward a more civil society, greater reconciliatory participation in the world, and a more integrated, salvific expression of Christianity throughout the globe. Drilling more deeply into the implications of such a living faith we surely will uncover its greater application to social theory, inter-human relations, and civil speech among the varieties of the religious, the seekers, and those who affirm Ellul's self-same *living* faith.

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