

Jacques Ellul & the Bible

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The “Analogy of Faith”: What does it mean? Why, and what for?

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As a diligent reader of the Bible, Jacques Ellul placed scriptural revelation at the heart of his work, and in particular, his ethical works. It is thus that he can write: “The criteria of my thought is biblical revelation; the content of my thought is biblical revelation; my point of departure is furnished by biblical revelation; the method is the dialectic according to which biblical revelation is given to us; and the objective is the search for the signification of biblical relation for Ethics.”² The ethical thought of Jacques Ellul is thus “scripturo-centric,” conferring a singular status on the Biblical text. How, in effect, did Jacques Ellul read the Bible? And in what manner is his reading original, singular, and capable of renewing current interpretations?

To respond to these questions, we will proceed in four steps. First, we will indicate the critiques which Jacques Ellul addressed to exegesis. Next, we will present the core principles of the Ellulian approach to the Bible. In the third step, we will pause on the method *par excellence* recommended by the professor from Bordeaux: “the analogy of faith.” And we will conclude with four examples of biblical texts interpreted according to the analogy of faith.

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² Jacques Ellul, *Le Vouloir et le Faire. Une critique théologique de la morale* (1964), Genève, Labor et Fides, 2013², p. 19.

1) Critique of Exegesis

Jacques Ellul addresses lively critiques towards historical-critical exegesis as well as structural exegesis. He does not consider them to be false or vain, as they are doubtless exact and useful for the nature of the science, “but they do not take one step towards the ultimate. Certainly, they are in the service of exactitude, but they say nothing on the subject of truth, and do not permit it to be glimpsed but perhaps hide it.”³ It is thus the tension between Reality and Truth which is invoked here to disqualify scientific and technical exegetical methods, a tension which recurs throughout the Ellulian oeuvre. Jacques Ellul particularly reproaches these methods for stripping the biblical text of any spiritual dimension and reducing it to nothing more than a text like any other (similar to a work of Homer or Plato). To treat the Bible like an inert object would be like a surgeon forgetting that the patient on whom they are operating is alive, performing a dissection or an autopsy instead of an operation which would save them.⁴

This accusation recalls Søren Kierkegaard’s polemical and sarcastic charge against those who pretend to read a love letter with an arsenal of dictionaries, concordances, and encyclopedias.⁵ Now, the Bible is a love letter, sent by God to his reader, to touch their heart and address the most intimate areas of their existence.

Jacques Ellul equally critiques Marxist exegesis which was fashionable in the 1970s, and notably that of Fernando Belo, who purported “to read Mark via Marx.”⁶ The professor from Bordeaux catalogues the innumerable historical errors which permit Belo to integrate the gospel into the Marxist schema,⁷ and particularly reproaches him for performing a materialist and political reduction of a text which, precisely, refuses any materialist interpretation of life.⁸

What, then, is the alternative that Jacques Ellul proposes to these exegetical impasses?

³ Jacques Ellul, *Sans feu ni lieu. Signification biblique de la Grande Ville* (1975), Paris, La Table Ronde (coll. La petite Vermillon n°191), 2003², p. 17.

⁴ Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Éthique de la liberté*, Genève, Labor et Fides (coll. Nouvelle série théologique, n°27+30), 1975, tome 1, p. 210.

⁵ Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, « Pour un examen de conscience recommandé aux contemporains » (1851), *Œuvres Complètes*, Paris, Éditions de l’Orante, volume XVIII, 1966, p. 83-87.

⁶ Cf. Fernando Belo, *Lecture matérialiste de l’évangile de Marc. Récit, pratique, idéologie*, Paris, Le Cerf, 1974, p. 18.

⁷ Cf. Jacques Ellul, *L’idéologie marxiste chrétienne. Que fait-on de l’évangile ?* (1979), Paris, La Table Ronde (coll. La petite Vermillon n°246), 2006², p. 113-153.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 148-150.

2) The core principles of the Ellulian approach to the Bible

If Jacques Ellul refuses the scientific approach to the Bible, it is in order to oppose it to meditation inspired by Kierkegaard. This latter approach amounts to considering biblical revelation as addressing the very existence of the subject. But in this regard, he inverts the contemporary perspective, notably in protestant milieus, which consists in opening the Bible each time that we seek a response to our questions (whether ethical, social, or existential). Jacques Ellul clearly does not conceive of the Bible as a recipe book, nor even as a book of responses to our questions. The Bible is not a book of responses, but a book of questions, which God poses to the believing reader.⁹ If we come to the Bible with questions, these will find no response here; instead, they will undergo a displacement, a decentering, and we will come away from the Bible with our questions renewed and with new questions posed to us.¹⁰ It is therefore up to us to respond to them, that is, to be responsible in assuming our responses. The Bible is thus a book which directs man to his freedom and responsibility. A believer's reading is a listening, since faith is revitalized in silence.¹¹ The Bible poses us three principal questions.¹² It poses a confessional question: "Who do you say that I am?";¹³ an ethical question: "What have you done with your brother?";¹⁴ and an existential question referring to our quest: "Who are you looking for?"¹⁵ We are thus interrogated, and invited to give a confessional response, an ethical response, and an existential response, by the word and by our life. Cain, for his part, refuses to

⁹ Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Éthique de la liberté*, op. cit., tome 1, p. 203 ; tome 2, p. 164, 181-182 ; *La foi au prix du doute : « encore quarante jours... »* (1980), Paris, La Table Ronde (coll. La petite Vermillon n°404), 2015³, p. 147-152 ; « Karl Barth et nous », *Bulletin du Centre protestant d'études*, 37^e année, n°4-5, juin 1985, p. 5-12 (ici p. 7) ; *La Genèse aujourd'hui* (avec François Tosquelles), Le Collier, Éditions de l'AREFPPI, 1987, p. 214 ; *Mort et espérance de la résurrection. Conférences inédites de Jacques Ellul*, Lyon, Éditions Olivétan, 2016, p. 53 ; *Les sources de l'éthique chrétienne. Le Vouloir et le Faire, parties IV et V*, Introduction and notes by Frédéric Rognon, Genève, Labor et Fides, 2018, p. 57-58 ; Gilbert Comte, « Entretien avec Jacques Ellul : "Je crois que nous sommes dans une période de silence de Dieu" », *Le Monde*, 8 novembre 1977, p. 1-2 (ici p. 2).

¹⁰.Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Éthique de la liberté*, op. cit., tome 2, p. 164 ; *La Genèse aujourd'hui* (avec François Tosquelles), Le Collier, Éditions de l'AREFPPI, 1987, p. 214.

¹¹.Cf. Jacques Ellul, *La foi au prix du doute : « encore quarante jours... »*, op. cit., p. 151-155.

¹².Cf. *ibid.*, p. 135-137.

¹³.Matthew 16,15; Mark 8:29 ; Luke 9:20. The diversity of Peter's responses could support the Ellulian reading of the Bible as a book of questions. The responses can thus vary from one person to another, but also with one person according to their stage in life.

¹⁴.Cf. Genèse 4,9-10a. Le texte dit plus précisément : « Le Seigneur dit à Caïn : "Où est Abel ton frère ?" Il répondit : "Je ne sais pas. Suis-je le gardien de mon frère, moi ?" Alors il dit : "Qu'as-tu fait ?" »

¹⁵.Jean 20,15.

respond to the question of God, and thus to assume his ‘responsibilities.’¹⁶ We often pose questions to the Bible or about the Bible; too often, we forget to receive the questions that the Bible itself poses to us.¹⁷ Instead of posing questions to the Bible, as the believer ordinarily does, and instead of posing questions about the Bible, as the exegete does, with both cases starting from extra-biblical concerns, at risk of instrumentalizing revelation, it is a matter of letting the Bible pose questions to the world and to believers; it is thus a matter of having a freedom as robust towards the assumptions of the world as it is towards the given revelation.¹⁸

3) “The analogy of faith”

But the royal method which Jacques Ellul proposes, in order to escape both literalism and textual critique, is that of the ‘analogy of faith.’ This expression comes to us from the apostle Paul, who employs it only once (it is thus a *hapax*) in the epistle to the Romans:¹⁹ κατὰ τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως in Greek, *fidei analogia* in Latin. It is situated in a passage consecrated to different qualities which are given to different people in the heart of the Church: prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, generosity, direction of the community, mercy.²⁰ The analogy of faith is attached to the persona of the prophet: “Since we have different gifts, according to the grace which has been accorded to us, let the one who has the gift of prophecy exercise it according to the analogy of faith.”²¹

John Calvin retook this Pauline expression in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*²² (in his exegesis of Romans 12:6), and in several places in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.²³ In his commentary, Calvin pleads in favor of a broad conception of prophecy, understood not as the gift of predicting the future, but as a right intelligence of Scripture and a capacity to explain it clearly. It is thus to seek to accord all doctrine taught from Scripture with the foundations of the

¹⁶ Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Éthique de la liberté*, *op. cit.*, tome 2, p. 181-182.

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, tome 1, p. 203.

¹⁸ Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Éthique de la liberté*, *op. cit.*, tome 1, p. 205.

¹⁹ Romans 12, 6b.

²⁰ Cf. Romans 12, 4-8.

²¹ Romans 12, 6.

²² Cf. Jean Calvin, *Commentaires de Jean Calvin sur le Nouveau Testament. Tome quatrième : Épître aux Romains*, Aix-en-Provence / Fontenay-sous-bois, Éditions Kerygma / Éditions Farel, 1978, p. 292-293.

²³ Cf. Jean Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrétienne*, Aix-en-Provence / Charols, Éditions Kerygma / Éditions Excelsis, 2009 : « Au roi de France », p. xxx ; livre iv, chapitre xvi, §4, p. 1252 ; livre iv, chapitre xvi, §8, p. 1256 ; livre iv, chapitre xvii, §32, p. 1321.

faith.²⁴ In *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin mentions the analogy of faith beginning in his address to the king of France which introduces the work. Against his adversaries who accuse him of turning the Word of God from its true meaning, the Reformer recalls this: “When St. Paul wanted every prophecy to be conformed to the analogy and likeness of faith, he gave a most certain rule for testing every interpretation of scripture (Rom. 12[6]). Now if our teaching is measured by this rule of faith we have the victory in hand.”²⁵ In the main body of this voluminous treatment, John Calvin has recourse to the concept of the analogy of faith on the subjects of the baptism of children and the communion meal. Infant baptism is not explicitly affirmed in the Bible, but a silence does not imply a censure; otherwise, women would not be permitted to take communion; on the other hand, there is a question of the baptism of entire families; it is thus conforming to the analogy of faith that we can lay biblical foundations for the baptism of children.²⁶ By the same token, the Reformer defends his comprehension of the mystery of the holy supper based on the methodological principal of the analogy of faith.²⁷ According to Calvin, the analogy of faith thus consists in interpreting Scripture by Scripture, allowing Scripture to interpret itself: to dig deeply into each text to make it cohere with the other texts of the Bible.

Jacques Ellul joins Calvin in his understanding of this rule of reading, while still slightly demarcating his own position. In the second part of *To Will and To Do*,²⁸ an unpublished text recently published in French and currently under translation into English, the professor from Bordeaux consecrates long developments to the analogy of faith.²⁹ Following Karl Barth, while polemically disagreeing with him, Ellul begins by clearly distinguishing the *analogia fidei* from the *analogia entis*, a concept which is situated at the base of natural theology in the style of Thomas Aquinas.³⁰ His critique directed towards Barth consists in saying that the theologian from Basel ceded to the temptation that he denounced himself (of resorting to the *analogia entis*). Jacques

²⁴ Cf. Jean Calvin, *Commentaires de Jean Calvin sur le Nouveau Testament. Tome quatrième : Épître aux Romains*, *op. cit.*, p. 292-293.

²⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French Edition* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 8; for the French, see Jean Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrétienne*, *op. cit.*, p. xxx. [Translator’s note: my own translation of the French varies slightly: “When Paul declared that all prophecy ought to be interpreted according to the analogy and the similitude of faith (Rom. 12:6), he pronounced a rule sure to apply to all interpretation of scripture. If then our doctrine is examined according to this measure of faith, we have the victory in hand.”]

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 1252, 1256.

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 1321.

²⁸ Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Les sources de l’éthique chrétienne. Le Vouloir et le Faire, parties IV et V*, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 287-311.

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 281-285.

Ellul then distances himself from Calvin in limiting the analogy of faith to the exercise of prophecy *stricto sensu*, in place of making of this rule a very general principle for the interpretation of all biblical texts.³¹ He nevertheless understands the mission of the prophet as being properly ethical—that is, as consisting of enunciating an ethic, under the inspiration of the Spirit, and in guaranteeing its objectivity by confronting it with Scripture: “If, then, prophecy consists in this formulation of a moral *hic et nunc*, inspired by the Spirit of God, departing from and relating to Holy scripture, we understand that the analogy of faith in question here effectively concerns the interpretation of biblical texts, and that is a matter of a guarantee of objectivity.”³² It does not prevent Jacques Ellul from implicitly positioning himself close to the broad conception of Calvin in applying this method to numerous texts, in which he believes he discerns an ethical intention: “There cannot be a formulation of a moral for Christians based on the deep comprehension of ethical texts unless the analogy of faith can be applied,” he declares.³³ He defines the analogy as “a relation between elements of different natures or grandeurs,”³⁴ but also as “the comprehension of the *reason*”³⁵ for this relation. The interpretation of Scripture therefore consists in understanding the gap between biblical revelation and the contemporary moral of an era, in order to reproduce the same gap in our own milieu, without adopting in a literal manner a statement which is outmoded today. Now, it is the work of salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ that constitutes the objectivity of the very heart of revelation. The entire Bible points to Jesus Christ, and designates him as Lord and Savior. Consequently, Jesus Christ must be the constant in relation to which the analogy of faith must be established.³⁶ And if a passage of the biblical corpus seems to depart from the image and the face of the God of love that Jesus has revealed to us, it must be worked on, to the point of discerning what can be put in coherence with this kernel of revelation.

4) Examples of the Application of the Method of the Analogy of Faith

We will take four examples of difficult biblical texts which the method of the analogy of faith will allow us to clarify, by hearing them in echo with other texts, in a harmonious

³¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 292.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 293.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 308-311.

symphony. We present them in relying on the commentary of Jacques Ellul, but also in prolonging it beyond what Ellul wrote concerning these texts.

a) *Qoheleth / Ecclesiastes*

Ecclesiastes is the biblical book that Jacques Ellul loved the most: “There is probably no other text in the Bible that I have so probed, from which I have received so much—that has affected me and spoken to me so much.”³⁷ He therefore consecrated a work of meditation to Ecclesiastes, *Reason for Being*³⁸—a book which he considered to be the conclusion to the ensemble of his work.³⁹ For his study, our author affirms to have chosen a path which inverts the academic method, departing from the Hebrew text itself and not from commentaries.⁴⁰ He similarly refuses to consider the Bible as equal to any other literary text, since it is the bearer of revelation.⁴¹ That is why Jacques Ellul seeks a textual coherence beyond apparent contradictions: for example, between “all is vanity (including wisdom)” and “seek wisdom (because it comes from God).” And he orients this coherence in a dialectical movement between “Reality” and “Truth.” The “Reality” is that all is vanity, and the “Truth” is that everything is a gift of God. “Reality” prevents the “Truth” from being an evasion, while the “Truth” prevents “Reality” from being hopeless.⁴² All commentators of Ecclesiastes have been disconcerted by the absence of a logical plan, and have generally searched to identify different authors and different editorial layers. According to Jacques Ellul, the coherence does not come from a plan but from a weave, like a threading of reflections which become entangled, echoing one another. The dialectic between vanity and wisdom finds its end in God: wisdom makes the vanity of everything apparent, but wisdom is itself vanity, and yet vanity is overtaken by wisdom. And nevertheless, the book of Qoheleth does not achieve itself in this immanent circle because of the reference to God, which is central and decisive because it ties together the dispersed factors. The contradictions are not gross errors of forgetfulness, as the exegetes say, but one of the keys of the book: “The principle of non-contradiction is a principle of death. Contradiction is the condition of a communication.”⁴³ The work of Kierkegaard was decisive for the discernment by Jacques Ellul of the dialectical movement at the heart of the book

³⁷Jacques Ellul, *La raison d'être. Méditation sur l'Écclésiaste*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1987, p. 11.

³⁸Cf. Jacques Ellul, *La raison d'être, op. cit.*

³⁹Cf. *ibid.*, p. 13-14.

⁴⁰Cf. *ibid.*, p. 11. This remark betrays deep prejudices as to the exegetical methods taught and practiced in the Faculties of Theology.

⁴¹Cf. *ibid.*, p. 16-18.

⁴²Cf. *ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 52.

of Qoheleth. And it is equally in reference to the Danish thinker that our author finally pleads in favor of a subjective and intuitive approach: "...above all, to let oneself be seized by the beauty of the text, to receive it first of all in emotion and silent listening as with music, and to allow one's sensitivity, one's imagination to speak before wanting to analyse and 'understand.'"⁴⁴

Jacques Ellul synthesizes his approach by a spiral schema,⁴⁵ thanks to which we can traverse the apparent contradictions of the book of Qoheleth in following the movement of the text. We are not dealing with a book written by three authors: the one, sceptic and disabused, seeing in all things only vanity; the second, rich with experiences, considering a wisdom without God as an art of living with realism and lucidity; and the third, who confesses his faith in God. It is a question here of one author, who departs from vanity (1:1-11), responds to it with wisdom (1:12-18), but falls again in vanity since wisdom itself is vanity (2:1-11); this vicious circle finds its opening in God (who appears for the first time in 2:24); it is "before God" that everything takes on meaning, because everything is a "gift of God" (3:10-17; 5:17-19), therefore, "fear God" (5:6). And God has the last word (12:10-13). It is indeed a question of applying the method of the analogy of faith, for God is the beginning, the center and the end of the Bible, all converges towards him, and consequently every text which would seem to neglect Him can be clarified if we dig to the point that, finally, we find God therein.

b) *The Parable of the Wedding Party*⁴⁶

Our second example will be that of the parable of the wedding party.⁴⁷ We are within a parable of the kingdom. These parables of the kingdom are spread all along the gospel of Matthew, from chapter thirteen until chapter twenty-five, with each one giving us an image of the kingdom of heaven: "the kingdom of heaven is like..." Like a man, a mustard seed, yeast, a hidden treasure, a merchant, a net, a king. Here, in our parable, the kingdom of heaven is similar to a king. This king organizes a wedding feast for his son. And once the feast is put in place, he sends his servants to call those who were invited. These latter were thus aware of the invitation, they knew that the wedding feast was going to take place, and that they were invited. And yet, they avoid responding,

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴⁶ Cf. Jacques Ellul, *On Freedom, Love and Power*, Compiled, Edited and Translated by Willem H. Vanderburg, Toronto / Buffalo / London, University of Toronto Press, 2010, p. 188-195.

⁴⁷ Cf. Matthew 22, 1-14; Luke 14, 16-24.

and decline the invitation, too occupied in their fields and their commerce. And the invitees seize the servants, insult them and kill them. So the king takes his vengeance in making them perish. Then he tells his servants to go invite everyone they can find, in the streets and crossroads, “wicked and good,” the text specifies. Wicked and good: all are invited. This seems to be a first decisive element.⁴⁸ And the wedding hall is full of guests. Now, one man has not worn his garment for the wedding feast. Only one in the whole crowd: this is a second determining element.⁴⁹ The king asks him how he entered, and he remains silent. So the king says to his servants: “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the shadows outside, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth...” The king behaves in the manner of a tyrant. Ought we therefore identify the king with God, as is often done? Must we identify the disinterested guests with believers who are a bit too lukewarm, and the poorly dressed guest as the unbeliever, the incredulous one, the infidel, the one who does not live according to the Gospel, as we often do? Must we therefore see in this parable a means of terrorizing bad believers in menacing them with hell, as has often been done? Is this the image of the Father that Jesus came to reveal to us, when he addressed himself to us in a decrypted manner, outside of the parables?

Let us therefore retake the elements which constitute the point of the text: wicked and good share the feast; and only one is thrown into the shadows, punished and tormented. Even the disinterested guests are not thrown into the shadows where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. They are killed, they are dead, but they are not submitted to these torments. Nothing is told us about what happens to them after their death. There is only one here who is condemned, expelled, tormented for all. Who is this one, if not Christ himself? This man who is thrown out, without a wedding garment, it is Jesus himself! This man who stays silent when interrogated and menaced, it is Jesus, who remained silent before Pilate! All the others are clothed in a wedding garment, the wicked and the good: everyone! For it is Jesus who took on himself our faults, and was condemned for us, in our place! This is what the apostle Paul says to the Corinthians in a text just as enigmatic and scandalous: “The one who knew no sin, God made him become sin for us, so that we could become in Him the justice of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). He did not become a sinner, he became sin! And he paid for us. He was thrown into torment, weeping and gnashing of teeth: he “descended into

⁴⁸ Cf. Jacques Ellul, *On Freedom, Love and Power*, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

⁴⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 191, 194.

hell,” as the Creed says...All this was done for us. And this is in coherence with the ensemble of the evangelical message, according to the analogy of faith.

So then, we might say: But this God is cruel, who throws his son into torment! It is here, dear friends, that I see the whole interest of believing in the Trinity. If we believe that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, if then Jesus Christ is none other than God, but that he is God as the Father is God and as the Holy Spirit is God, then this is not a god who cruelly throws a man, *a fortiori* his son, into torment. Let us not be prisoners of a literal or allegorical reading of the parable, according to which a king expels a guest. The king does not represent the Father, he represents the kingdom, since it is the kingdom of heaven which is similar to a king. No, according to the trinitarian faith, it is God as Jesus Christ who gives himself fully for us: it is a gift of self and not the sacrifice of someone else. God gives himself fully to suffering and torment, to weeping and gnashing of teeth, so that we, who are sinners, would be freed, saved from these troubles. And this is in coherence with the ensemble of the gospel message, according to the analogy of faith.

And the parable ends thus: “For many are called, but few are chosen.” Here again, the formula is strange. The parable has just told us that the wedding hall was full of guests. And the lesson of the parable consists in telling us that there are many called, but few chosen. We thus cannot reasonably identify the guests, who are innumerable, with the chosen, who are very few. Perhaps the guests are the called rather than the chosen...This final formula cannot signify that very few will be saved at the end of time.⁵⁰ “Few are chosen” can mean, by euphemism: “none are chosen, not one chosen.” This formula signifies thus that we are not worthy of being saved, not one among us. But that Jesus alone has paid so that we would be saved. This formula signifies the infinite love of the Father without which we can do nothing by ourselves. And this, too, is in coherence with the ensemble of the gospel message, according to the analogy of faith.

c) *The Parable of the Judgement*⁵¹

Our third example is that of the parable of the Judgement. This text poses a certain number of problems. It seems to go against the idea of salvation by grace, and to defend the idea of salvation

⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 193-195.

⁵¹ Cf. Matthew 25, 31-46.

by works. Moreover, it raises the question of hell:⁵² those who will have accomplished works of mercy (the sheep) will be blessed and will enter into the Kingdom, and those who have not accomplished these works (the goats) will be cursed and will go into eternal fire. For those who have given food to the hungry, and drink to the thirsty, those who have welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, visited the sick and the prisoner, have served Christ himself. They therefore have the right to eternal life. But those who have not done all this have not served Christ. And consequently, they will go to eternal punishment.

But there is a small detail here which has too often gone neglected: the sheep are all surprised to learn that they have served Christ in serving their neighbor; by the same token, the goats are all surprised to learn that they have not served Christ in not serving their neighbor. They only discover this after the fact. They thus ignore, at the moment of their encounter with their neighbor, that Christ identified himself with the littlest person, that he was, literally, this little one. In other words, those of whom it is a question in Matthew 25 have not read Matthew 25! And for good reason! And this effect of surprise is the first decisive element. For we see thus that it is not to be saved that the sheep have acted in this manner, but because they let their hearts speak. The attitude of the sheep, like that of the goats, was not linked to salvation, but to the capacity to love or the incapacity to love the neighbor in distress. It is the opening or the closing of the heart which is in question here, the opening or closing of the heart before the concrete situation and the immediate needs of the littlest one there is, quite simply.

It is in this manner that a second small detail, still more decisive, must be noticed. First of all, what the Son of man really says to the goats is that “in the measure where (εφ’ ὅσον) you have not done this for one of these little ones, it is for me that you have not done it.” It is a question of *one* of these little ones. This means that it suffices to neglect one little one, only one, to be damned! Even if you help ninety-nine little ones, if you leave one of the hundred aside without regarding them, you are damned! But this signifies therefore that we are all damned, for we have all neglected our neighbor at least once. We are all condemnable. This is the logic of the Law of the First Testament: it suffices to have broken one of the 613 commandments of the Torah, all while having accomplished the other 612, to have sinned against the entire Torah. But now if we look at what

⁵² Jacques Ellul signals that there is no question of hell except in the parables, because these are not lessons of doctrinal teaching: cf. Jacques Ellul, *Ce que je crois*, Paris, Grasset, 1987, p. 257-258 ; *On Freedom, Love and Power*, *op. cit.*, p. 157

is said to the sheep, we observe that the same thing is said—the same, but inverted—on the subject of the sheep: “In the measure where you have done this for *one* of these little ones, it is for me that you have done it.” This means that it suffices to have served one little one, only one, to be saved! Now, we have all helped our neighbor at least once. Even one time! Thus, we are all saved! Or more precisely, we are all at once condemned and saved, or rather, condemnable and acquitted, for we are all, every woman and man among us, simultaneously goat and sheep. Each one of us is at once a goat and a sheep.

It is here that the point of our text is situated: in this paradoxical knot between what we have not done, even if only once, and what we have done, even if only once. In our condemnation, which we all merit, and our salvation, which none of us merits, but which is offered to all. And this paradox invites us to turn towards grace. All condemnable, we cannot live except by the grace of God. And in this, this text echoes in every Gospel, in the epistles, and in the ensemble of the New Testament, according to the analogy of faith. For this parable is made to bring us to **committing ourselves into the hands of grace.**

*d) Men and Women*⁵³

Our fourth and final example concerns what the apostle Paul says about women and to women. Generally, we have an image of Paul as a conservative phallocrat, which we illustrate by citing the famous formula: “Wives, be submitted to your husbands!”⁵⁴ But how can we understand this injunction, which contradicts the liberating work of Christ for women, these first witnesses of the resurrection, which is to say, the first witnesses of what is at the very heart of our faith⁵⁵ (which is absolutely unique among all religions), and which contradicts even the word of Paul which affirms that “there is neither man nor woman”?⁵⁶ How to interpret this verse according to the analogy of faith? First of all, Paul does not say, “Wives, be submitted to your husbands!” We must return to the preceding verse, to read: “Be submitted to one another!”⁵⁷ And verse 22 continues: “In the same fashion, wives, towards your husbands!” Thus, wives are invited to do regarding their husbands what everyone does (men included!), one to another, at the heart of the Church.

⁵³ Cf. Jacques Ellul, *La subversion du christianisme* (1984), Paris, La Table Ronde (coll. La petite Vermillon n°145), 2011³, p. 122-124 ; *The Subversion of Christianity*, transl. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Eugene (Oregon), Wipf & Stock (The Jacques Ellul Legacy Series), 1986, p. 78-79.

⁵⁴ Ephesians 5:22.

⁵⁵ Cf. Jacques Ellul, *La subversion du christianisme, op. cit.*, p. 120 ; *The Subversion of Christianity, op. cit.*, p. 77.

⁵⁶ Galatians 3:28.

⁵⁷ Ephesians 5:21.

Additionally, Paul addresses husbands, saying: “Husbands, love your wives!”⁵⁸ employing the verb ἀγαπᾶν, which does not designate conjugal love, but unconditional love, the love with which God loves us. And there is a further addendum to this addendum: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself for her!”⁵⁹ Thus, Paul asks of men something much more demanding than he asks of women: to be ready to give their life for their wife...⁶⁰ And this is in coherence, according to the analogy of faith, with what biblical revelation says about women, and about relations between men and women, including Paul who affirms in the first epistle to the Corinthians: “The body of the woman belongs to her husband,”⁶¹ which conforms completely to the mentality of the era, but he hastens to add: “and the body of the husband belongs to his wife.”⁶² And this, this is absolutely inconceivable, unheard of, revolutionary, subversive, both in Paul’s time and today: complete equality between men and women, even in bed. The method of the analogy of faith allows us to see that Paul, far from being a frightful misogynist, is a man of the avant-garde.

Conclusion

Throughout these four examples, chosen among many others, Jacques Ellul invites us to rediscover the Bible as a love letter from God to men, including in its most enigmatic aspects. Such is the potential for the renewal of traditional readings which the method of the analogy of faith offers us.

Abstract

In his relation to the Holy Scriptures, Jacques Ellul has always had a distrustful attitude towards historical-critical exegesis. He opposed it to Kierkegaardian meditation, and above all the method of the “analogy of faith” (or “proportion of faith”). What does this mean? It is an expression of the Apostle Paul (κατὰ τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως: Romans 12: 6), rediscovered by John Calvin, which aims to let the Scriptures interpret themselves. According to the thought of

⁵⁸ Ephesians 5:25a.

⁵⁹ Ephesians 5:25.79.

⁶⁰ Cf. Jacques Ellul, *La subversion du christianisme*, op. cit., p. 123 ; *The Subversion of Christianity*, op. cit., p. 79.

⁶¹ 1 Corinthians 7:4a.

⁶² 1 Corinthians 7:4b.

Jacques Ellul, the “analogy of faith” is the best alternative to scientific exegesis. We will show its main principles and its heuristic potential, and will illustrate it by several examples, drawing on the second part of *To Will and to Do* (first published in French in 2018, unpublished in English), and to various biblical commentaries from Jacques Ellul.