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The Technological Church

Introduction

   We are at this conference because Jacques Ellul was right: we live in "the technological society." He saw technique changing humanity. This paper explores a small but important corner of the technological society: the adoption of technique by the local church in the United States. I argue that because the natures of technique and the church are incompatible, the church's adoption of technique amounts to self-destruction. However, the church can find hope in Ellul's *The Technological Society* and other works that provide both a diagnosis of the problem and a spirit of resistance to counter technique's domination.

Defining Technique

   Ellul defines technique as the "totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency… in every field of human activity."[1] He argues that the technological advancements of the last two centuries have occurred too quickly, and therefore pose a unique problem in human history.[2] The technologies we use never result in our rest or creativity but only mark the beginning ventures of future technologies with greater efficiency. Ellul observed that the progress of technique always forces human beings to change. Technique, therefore, is not a particular technology but the forced integration of humanity into the world of technology. Ellul contends that we now function more like "devices" in an "artificial world" than human beings, and that technique has rendered entire fields like music, science, politics, and of note for the purposes of this paper - religion - as unintelligible.[3] I argue that technique, rather than doctrine or tradition, determines what the local church says and does.

Defining the Local Church

   When I refer to the local church's embrace of technique, I am referring to American congregations who adhere to the Christian orthodoxy found in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. Other religions will certainly identify some of the same problems in their own houses of worship,

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[1] Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, Translated by John Wilkinson, (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), xxv.

[2] See Ellul's "Historical Development" in *The Technological Society*, 23-64.

[3] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 79-80.

but in keeping with Ellul, I am convinced that the more specific we are in recognizing our enmeshment in technique, the better we will resist its power.[4] I welcome your feedback on how you see technique influencing your own specific spheres of life.

The central truth of every local church is the incarnation: God became man, revealing himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. What Jesus said, God said. What Jesus did, God did. God, in Jesus, joined his creation, living the embodied human experience. The importance of this embodiment extends to every local church. Scripture calls the church "the body of Christ."[5] As God in Christ had a body on earth at a certain time and place, so every local church is now the embodiment of Christ in its specific community. For two millenia, Christian orthodoxy has stated that the church is where God's presence is especially experienced. Therefore, the church revolves around the proclamation of God's incarnation, but it is also an incarnational being itself, relying on the physical presence and sensory participation of its people.

Technique eliminates embodiment, and is therefore opposed to the central idea of incarnation. Yet congregations are zealously adapting themselves into the digital sphere, imbibing all of technique's "means" with little regard to its "ends."[6] Like any early adoption of technique, churches started using the latest technologies with the best of intentions, wanting to reach their people within their digital worlds. Live streaming allowed congregants who are sick or out of town to watch the service. Facebook groups were useful for spreading information quickly. Most notably, online churches provided a spiritual touchstone for isolated people during the Covid-19 pandemic. As people's content consumption went remote, so did their church.

The problem is that congregations embraced technique without questioning its long term effects on its message and ministry. Ellul notes that a "single technique and its guarded application to a limited sphere is the starting point of disassociation."[7] When the stay-at-home orders ceased and sanctuaries filled back up, churches still poured time and resources into the methods of technique: websites, social media, live streaming, online forums, and podcasts. The result is a disembodied church actively eliminating its most distinctive doctrine and ethic.

Technique and Incarnational Truth

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[4] Jacques Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, Translated by Lisa Richmond, (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016), 29.
[5] 1 Cor 12:27, Eph 4:12.
[6] Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 39-62.
[7] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 398.

Churches have always believed that God's presence is transcendent, but it is not ethereal. God's presence is experienced when his people gather for worship. Every Sunday service is a sacred, mysterious display of a paradox: the embodied transcendence of God through Jesus Christ. Therefore, worship services are sensory endeavors in which congregants sing songs, listen to the sermon, bow for prayer, and take the Lord's Supper together.

Much is written about the "magic" of technology. Various forms of technique give us a sense that we are able to transcend time and space. Ellul laments that our "scientific achievements have desacralized the world in which we live," destroying humanity's appreciation of mystery, while at the same time appearing to be "sacred" in and of themselves.[8] Ellul once believed that the transcendence of God is the only thing technique cannot "absorb" or "destroy."[9] What he did not foresee is that by going digital, churches would trade the mysterious presence of God in worship for the magic of technology, substituting a religious transcendence for a technological one.

One worship song begins, "Come, behold the wondrous mystery."[10] Without fully understanding the technology involved, congregants are increasingly susceptible to love the transcendent mystery of a digital device that increases their convenience and efficiency while disregarding the mystery of God's truth embodied in gathered worship. The sanctuary is no longer the place to experience God because that can happen anywhere on demand. The worship service is relegated to just another video that can be turned ON or OFF at any time. Online church empowers viewers to become the new "the masters" of their "supernatural world," standing above the message of the church via personal technology.[11]

Technique is also forcing churches to become centers of entertainment. Viewers will naturally compare the church's message with the other online content they consume throughout the week. The new prelude to the worship service involves sitting on the couch, scrolling past cat videos and unsavory posts from online "friends." Ellul's American counterpart Neil Postman condemns such displays of sacred content on modern mediums because those mediums rob the

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[8] Ibid, 142, 145.
[9] Jacques Ellul, *In Season Out of Season*, Translated by Lani K. Niles, (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 211.
[10] Matt Boswell and Matt Papa, "Come Behold the Wondrous Mystery," Track #7 on *Look and Live* (Digital Album), 2013.
[11] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 192.

viewer of important context and seriousness.[12] If the viewers get bored, they can look anywhere else on their device or in their home for something more engaging. Therefore, churches are constantly seeking various technologies and methods to hold people's attention.

In her book *Restless Devices*, Professor Felicia Wu Song, a speaker at this conference, argues that social media encourages individuals to "broadcast" their lives as the "dominant mode of self-expression."[13] We see the same thing happening in churches that broadcast their services to get as many page views and social media interactions as possible.[14] The live stream is called "the new front door" of the church because now even people who want to physically attend a church will watch the live streams of several different churches before deciding which one to visit. Sanctuaries now resemble TV sets with back lighting and LED screens. Preachers who used to carefully exposit Scripture now play the part of self-help gurus, stand-up comedians, and political commentators in a desperate attempt for more clicks. Churches curate and upload short, out-of-context videos from the service onto social media, hoping a soundbite will go viral.

Discussing how technique affected politics, Ellul cautions that even "mediocre" politicians, using the tools of technique, could easily achieve their ends.[15] In the same way, the most influential churches in the United States have mastered the technological mediums, regardless of their understanding of the Scripture's incarnational message. Blogger Andrew Sullivan condemns this trend succinctly: "Christian leaders seem to think they need more distraction to counter distraction."[16] Ellul would be horrified to learn that technique has created thousands of Elmer Gantrys available on every screen in the world.[17]

Live streaming also forces congregations to censor themselves. Services traditionally included personal announcements of births, deaths, weddings, and prayer requests (i.e. "Ronnie is back in the hospital with an infection"). The music reflected the taste and background of the church. The preacher felt comfortable using his people's names in sermons. All of these personal elements communicated to people that God is with them. He cares for them, enters their particular situations, and personally rescues them from their struggles.

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[12] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) 104, 117.

[13] Felicia Wu Song, *Restless Devices: Recovering Personhood, Presence, and Place in the Digital Age*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic), 76.

[14] Ibid, 77.

[15] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 83.

[16] Quoted in Song, *Restless Devices*, 191.

[17] Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World* 49.

As churches digitize their service, these personal touches are going away. First, churches never know who is watching, so there is a need to protect the personal information of the congregation. Second, personal entreaties inside the sanctuary create a barrier for online viewers who need to "feel part of it." Third, personalized worship services are inefficient. Too many prayers and other interjections break up the "flow" of the service. Ellul notes that "art and literature… are tightly subordinated in different ways to mechanical efficiency."[18] Churches are redacting key elements of worship to appease generic, anonymous viewers.

The appeal to these viewers means that all churches using the methods of technique will eventually look the same. Technique can eat culture, tradition, philosophy, and doctrine for breakfast.[19] Whether congregations are traditionally Methodist or Presbyterian, Eastern or Western, ethnic or mult-cultural, technique puts all churches on the same online platforms in the same backlit sanctuaries with the same shallow preaching. In the context of American Christianity, only the few megachurches equipped to deliver the most generic, entertaining online worship experience will survive. The church can say goodbye to its main message: the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

Incarnational Ministry

Incarnation is also essential to the church's ministry - its collective work that happens throughout the week. We see the church's embodied mission whenever its members organize baby showers and meal trains for young families, volunteer at the local women's shelter, visit shut-ins for prayer and meals, and host Bible studies in their living rooms. Scripture claims that when the "body of Christ" does these things it is as if Jesus is doing them. Christian charity is not altruism but acting as Jesus himself. This mission requires physical presence, personal relationships, and authentic conversation. When the local church resembles the technological society, it ceases to be a comforting presence in the community.

Perhaps the greatest danger of the church's embrace of technique is its erasure of the individual. The church used to be a guaranteed haven for individuals who wanted to be known. Now streaming communicates to people that their presence is no longer required. No particular person is necessary or important enough for the church to function. Congregations act as if the embodiment of Christ on earth is a bygone metaphor for a simpler time. This erasure is at the

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[18] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 128
[19] Ibid, 14, 183, 280.

heart of Ellul's fears. He warns that "the technician's myth is simply *Man*—not you or I but an abstract entity."[20] The church has no way to know the stories, backgrounds, and struggles of the people watching their devices. They are just an IP address. Writing about the effects of the far-less technological radio and television, Ellul said the methods of technique mean "no more face-to-face encounters, no more dialogue."[21] The catastrophe is that individuals are led to believe they are attending church when in reality they are being directed to social media.[22] We will be horrified when we discover the long-term effects on the identities of people who have heard a message of incarnation from a disembodied platform.

While online church in some ways destroys personhood, it also encourages a radical individualism. Churches have always been counter-cultural in their call for people to give their time and resources. Conversely, social media platforms are free, entertaining products available to consume at any time. By becoming another platform, churches communicate to the public that God requires nothing from them and can always be engaged on their terms. Individuals judging churches for the quality of their online content will simply move onto a more entertaining product. The digital sphere leaves these people wondering what church has to offer them.

At the same time, online churches alienate people who are not tech savvy or have little access to screens. Ellul casts technique as a join-or-die "dilemma."[23] The people who cannot provide any kind of online feedback are naturally undervalued. Leaders are in danger of having "a certain contempt for whatever does not belong to [the] new world of means.[24] Online church becomes a double-edged sword: encouraging disembodied consumption on the one hand and forgetting about the technological underclass on the other.

Technique is also changing how churches evaluate their ministries. The Bible's "body" metaphor for the church carries a unique language of self-reflection: growing up into maturity through their practice of Christian values like faith, hope, and love.[25] The body's "success" cannot be evaluated in numerical form.

Yet churches now believe that, "whatever cannot be expressed numerically is to be eliminated."[26] Pastors who are pressured to "grow" (not mature) their churches regularly track

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[20] Ibid, 390.
[21] Ibid, 379-380.
[22] Felicia Wu Song points out a similar problem in "workplaces" and "schools" in *Restless Devices*, 42.
[23] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 84.
[24] Ibid, 162.
[25] 1 Cor 13:13, 1 Thess 1:3.
[26] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 168.

the "average attendance," "cash flow," and "giving units" in their congregation. Worship leaders organize their songs based on the desired emotional "flow" they want their audience to experience. Digital gurus are eager to help worship leaders purchase and organize technical equipment to keep up with "industry" standards. The rise of what Ellul calls "econometrics" in the church demonstrates technique's ability to change the institution's idea of its own mission.[27]

We also see technique changing the church's weekly ministries. Writing on the legal system (a field Ellul found especially resistant to technique), Ellul warns that the technology used to carry out a law will overpower the clear intent of the law.[28] Churches, which are far less resistant to technique, are facing this same issue. Tools of systemization, not personal care, are defining the church's interactions with its community. Congregants in need of prayer no longer have to talk to anyone at church. They can simply join a prayer "chat" on the church's Facebook page. People in need of financial help can email the church office which will assign a leader to respond to the need. Those with questions about the Christian faith are now directed to online videos that teach the basics of theology and the Bible. For millennia, pastors have recognized each of these instances as opportunities to dive into personal ministry. Now, pastors are more likely to resemble what Ellul calls "the economic man," disregarding any non-economic activity.[29] Churches believe technology provides the optimum ministry experience.

What is the church's embrace of technique?

The technological church is an oxymoron. Digitally-minded churches hardly resemble Christian houses of worship. Instead, they are the latest form of human technique, integrating a niche population of religious-minded Americans into the technological society by satisfying their need for transcendence and community via the glow of screens. The church, which from its beginning has shaped history, is becoming a "totally innocuous" group in the midst of the technological takeover.[30] Every believer who sits in a sanctuary "will no longer be able, materially or spiritually, to disengage himself from society… because the technical means are so numerous they invade his whole life and make it impossible for him to escape."[31]

Critiquing Ellul

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[27] Ibid, 164.
[28] Ibid, 300.
[29] Ibid, 219.
[30] Ibid, 414.
[31] Ibid, 139.

What can be done? By diagnosing the problem through the lens of *The Technological Society,* we have already completed the most important step: becoming aware of technique's grip on the church. We need to get Ellul's magnum opus in the hands of as many pastors as possible. When leaders identify their congregation's self-inflicted wounds, their digital absorption will become unpalatable. However, every correct diagnosis must be followed by treatment. We need a set of prescriptions for what to do next, and this leads us to offer a critique of Ellul's work.

The Technological Society, despite its length, gives little insight into resisting technique. This omission is baffling considering Ellul's thorough, penetrating analysis. Ellul's failure to make concrete recommendations is disquieting for any practitioner who has been moved by the scale of his work. What accounts for his refusal to present a way forward?

Professor David Gill, the president of our society, answers this question by noting that Ellul strongly opposed any kind of "systematic formulation of a Christian ethic."[32] Ellul argues that resistance can only be achieved when the individual studies the effects of a problem on their particular place and responds as specifically as possible.[33] There is much to be commended by this approach (which serves as a guideline for what I have done in this paper).

However, Ellul should have provided a set of general prescriptions in combating technique because he identified technique as a general threat. Recommending an overarching approach to a problem is not the same as systematizing ethics. Ironically, the Bible's wisdom literature (which Ellul loved) encourages people to act to their specific circumstances precisely by providing general guidance and boundaries. Yet Ellul, perhaps better positioned than anyone else to impart his wisdom in how to respond, did not!

Ellul's other failure is his overreliance on the individual. Following Kierkegaard, Ellul argues that the individual is "the source of hope" in struggles against society.[34] Again, there is much to be commended in believing every person is both powerful and responsible enough to refuse their society's demands. However, Gill notes that Ellul's prioritizing the individual comes at the expense of considering the "corporate possibilities of the church" to muster resistance in the "urban-technological civilization."[35] Ellul's disillusionment with the institutions in his life (including the church) is well documented. Yet he still made his local congregation a central

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[32] David Gill, *The Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul*, (Metuchen, New Jersey: The American Theological Library Association and The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1984), 112.

[33] Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World,* 29.

[34] Quoted in Gill, *The Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul,* 115.

[35] Gill, *The Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul,* 116.

element of his life. I wish Ellul had preached what he practiced: a tenacious involvement in the local church that encouraged fellow congregants to flee the pitfalls of their society together.

Because no Ellulian charge against technique exists, we will have to create our own. Yet Ellul does not leave us empty. Two of his works, *Presence in the Modern World* (his first book), and *The Meaning of the City* (the dialectic rejoinder to *The Technological Society*) provide a spirit of resistance as well as concrete ideas on responding to dire social contexts.[36] When we patchwork the ideas found in these works, we can respond to the church's digital problem.

A Way Forward

The first thing we must recognize is that the church has a couple of built-in advantages to counter technique. First, churches are full of committed individuals, deeply rooted in their communities. Many of these people struggle against the grip of technique in their own life and are eager for guidance. They can encourage each other in their resistance. Second, unlike other institutions, the idea of incarnation is still the foundation of the church that can provide shelter to those who return to it. Very few churches are totally online and most still appreciate embodiment as a social and theological idea. Ellul writes that "Christians' situation in the world is… a revolutionary and inexhaustible power."[37] The church is the natural place for Chrisitans to link arms and start a counteroffensive against technique.

Ellul's most general approach to society is an exposition of Paul's admonishment to the Romans: "Do not be conformed to the present age."[38] For Ellul, this means every Christian should 1) learn what the present age is, 2) refuse conformity and adaptation to its "trends," and 3) "change in our understanding about things, people, and situations."[39] These imperatives lead to three conclusions about the local church. First, because technique is totally opposed to incarnational truth and mission, every congregation must decide that technique cannot be redeemed. Second, the church should instead reclaim its way of being in the world.[40] And third, the church must serve as what Ellul calls a "sentinel," warning against technique's dangers against humanity.[41] Put in order, the way forward is for the church to first *think*, then *be*, then *do*.

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[36] Jacques Ellul, "Mirror of These Ten Years," *Christian Century*, 200-204, February 18, 1970.
[37] Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World* 27.
[38] Ibid, xviii.
[39] Ibid, xix-xx.
[40] Jacques Ellul, "Mirror of These Ten Years," *Christian Century*, 200-204, February 18, 1970.
[41] Ibid.

First, the church must come to the understanding that technique cannot be redeemed. An examination of recent book subtitles by Christian authors reveals a great enthusiasm to "redeem" and "recover" things in our society. Likewise, churches often believe that by simply using the latest technologies, they are spiritualizing neutral products that can become tools. In contrast, Ellul argues that the city, his stand-in for the technological society, cannot "become good."[42] The very nature of technique is to control, not be controlled. Ellul puts it vividly: "the devil's last trick is to make you think that you can put order back into this chaos."[43] Churches must classify the tools of technique as inherent threats to their way of being.

Only when churches decide technique is irredeemable will they find it possible to disable the live stream, delete their social media pages, and reject entertainment methods. These decisions would mean massive changes, giving leaders an opportunity to communicate that communal, in-person worship, and not technological development, is the bedrock of church. Such an outlook does not prohibit the church from using technology. As a public organization, churches will find it necessary to maintain websites with basic information and rely on email for quick communications. The key question congregations should always ask is: "how does this technology confuse or threaten the message and ethic of the incarnation of Christ?" When answered in good faith, churches will find it fairly easy to make decisions about which technologies to include or exclude.

Disabling a congregation's digital presence will also lead to the many previously unforeseen benefits of the incarnational model of church. It forces individuals to choose what kind of worshiper they will be - one who subscribes to the classic faith of two millennia or one who chooses to keep the church at an arm's length. It forces members to personally invite their friends and neighbors to church. It forces churches to frequently visit and pray with elderly and shut-in members rather than telling them to watch church online as some kind of consolation. While these decisions will be painful in the short-term, they accomplish Ellul's call to: "destroy the fate that oppresses the world."[44]

This great "disabling" will lead congregations to focus on their way of *being*. Ellul writes that "our world is in the process of losing its life because of action."[45] As a result, he believes

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[42] Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, Translated by Dennis Pardee, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1970), 36.

[43] Ibid, 167.

[44] Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 2.

[45] Ibid, 59.

that any Christian who simply lived outside society's superstructures committed "the revolutionary act par excellence."[46] But to simply *be* also requires an internal peace and security that is nonexistent in our technological society. Where can the church find such a state of being?

In his final chapter in *The Technological Society,* Ellul says that the only solution for humanity was either a mechanized integration into technique or the emergence of "a new end for human society."[47] But what if the church, freed from technique, could present its oldest hope as humanity's new end? Christian hope is the belief that God's promises will be fulfilled in the future return of Christ. Gill notes that for Ellul, this hope is the starting point of ethics, and "what the modern world needs most to hear."[48] Hope is also inherently incarnational. In a world obsessed with means, local congregations are the embodiment of what Ellul calls "the realized presence of the end" for the whole world.[49]

The way congregations accomplish this embodiment is by *being* who they have always been through preaching and prayer. When sermons are forms of entertainment, the church, like every other element of society, is about means. When sermons are careful expositions of the Word of God that hold out an embodied savior who will one day return, the church points to the one end that can free humanity from slavery to means. Preaching the incarnation of Christ accomplishes Ellul's definition of freedom: "the coming of something new into the world with a creative adherence to an inexhaustible good."[50]

The same goes for prayer. Nothing is quite so scandalous as bowing one's head to speak to a God that most do not believe exists. Ellul laments that when Christians give up in prayer, they give up their true "work" in the world.[51] Prayer is the one distinctive the church has, a trust that the means and ends observed in the world will only be settled in God's accounting alone. And as the church waits for God's return, it grows closer to its neighbors because it constantly prays to God on their behalf.[52] Because of this, prayer is the distillation of the church's way of being, a seemingly passive body of Christ calling for God's attention to its particular community. To preach and pray is to live. And to live, rather than to act, will be a scandal to the world that also attracts the weary souls disenchanted by the digital age.

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[46] Ibid, 61.

[47] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 429-430.

[48] Gill, *The Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul*, 45.

[49] Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 51, 57.

[50] Quoted in Gill, *The Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul*, 48.

[51] Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 13.

[52] Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, 75-77.

Having banned technique and reclaimed its way of being via hope, the church can finally shift its focus to *doing* two things: warning the world of the dangers of technique, and standing up for the individual person. The church's disabling of its digital tools is not enough, it must, as Ellul says, "speak as an unassimilated foreign body in our society."[53] Congregations should warn their communities that they are in danger of becoming machines and tools in the great engine of technique. Churches should be specific enough to condemn our society's positive assumptions about interruption, multitasking, and social media. Likewise, churches should warn their communities about the explosion of anxiety, depression, and neuroplasticity that technique is causing in them and their children. These stances will make the church the preeminent alternative to digital social harm.

At the same time, the church must stand for the individual person. Ellul calls for a theology of "nearness to people" in which Christians see every individual as "a person for whom Christ died."[54] As people despair in virtual reality, churches can embody the hope and hospitality of Jesus. The body of Christ should champion in-person interactions whenever possible through visitation to hospitals and nursing homes, hosting Bible studies in living rooms, and providing counsel to struggling people in coffee shops or on hiking trails. Just as it preaches that God came to earth in Jesus Christ, so the church must go to its community, prioritizing real interaction.

Conclusion

These recommendations are revolutionary acts fitting of Ellul's call for "Revolutionary Christianity."[55] I find no better conclusion than Ellul's own words: "to be revolutionary is to pass judgment on what is, on actual facts, in the name of a truth that is not yet (but is to come). And it means doing so in the belief that this truth is more authentic, more real, than the reality that surrounds us."[56] To adopt this spirit of resistance is to detach, at least a little bit, from the technological society.

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[53] Jacques Ellul, "Mirror of These Ten Years," *Christian Century*, 200-204, February 18, 1970.
[54] Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 83-44.
[55] Ibid, 17-38.
[56] Ibid, 32.