

Ellul as a Model of Christian Scholarship

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I was introduced to the work of Jacques Ellul as a doctoral student in the media ecology program at New York University in the late 1980s. As a student, studying under Neil Postman, I was asked to read *The Technological Society* and *Propaganda*. I found Ellul's thinking to be profoundly deep and complex. I admired his ability to analyze the affects of the technological milieu and I was curious about this author. After some hunting, I came across his book, *Perspectives on our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work*. As I read it, I excitedly discovered that Ellul was a believer in Jesus. As a Christian student, knowing that Ellul was a scholar who believed encouraged me all the more to consider how faith relates to media studies.

Ellul's work provided a foundational perspective for my doctoral dissertation—*Critical Thinking in an Image World*. His book, *The Humiliation of the Word*, gave me insight into the significance and qualities of critical thinking. Ellul believed that critical thinking in our technological culture was immensely important, though taking a critical stance in our image-dominated culture is very difficult.

According to Ellul, the world of images: advertising, photographs, video, television, film, move us toward an emotional stage of thinking. Reasoning, logic, analysis, critique, requires words. But, words, Ellul explained, are taking a back seat role to images. In his analysis, there are two irreconcilable modes of thinking—word-based thought and image-based thought. Ellul makes a plea for us to uphold language which enables abstract critical thought and reasoning. He believed that only language could help us communicate the Word—Jesus Christ.

Communicating the Word was very important to Ellul. As a protestant lay theologian, as well as a sociologist, Ellul wanted more than anything else to

honor Jesus Christ with his life and scholarship. I believe today's generation of Christian students and professors are looking for help in understanding how to critique, research, write, and live from a faith perspective. Christian professors are asking such questions as: How does faith relate to scholarship? How can one synthesize, or integrate, Biblical perspectives with academic studies? How can one critique prevailing theories from a Biblical worldview? How can we communicate the Word in our, sometimes hostile, academic environments?

Ellul, I believe, provides us with an outstanding role model. His cultural critiques have influenced the thinking of intellectuals around the world. However, many scholars who are aware of his sociological analyses are totally unfamiliar with his Biblical works. Unfortunately, many Christian professors and students are completely unaware of Ellul and his writings.

It is my hope that we can make Ellul's writings known to 21st century professors and students. Currently, I am working on an article to introduce Ellul to English education. I would also like to introduce him to Christian professors and students. I would encourage Christians who have never read Ellul to start with *The Presence of the Kingdom*. This book is a wonderful introduction to Ellul. It is here he discusses the role of the Christian in the world; the need for revolutionary Christianity; the main problems associated with our technological society; and, the need for a distinctly Christian way of life.

I would also suggest that Christian professors and students read Ellul's *Perspectives on our Age*. In this book, Ellul shares how he came to know Jesus. He shows that if we are going to be "salt and light" in contemporary culture, we must understand the times in which we live. He believed that our hope is ultimately in Jesus. Jesus allows us to critique our technological system from a unique vantage point outside the system. This, in turn, allows us freedom from enslavement to our technological environment.

Finally, I would recommend his book, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*. Some scholars discount Ellul because they think he is a technological determinist who pessimistically believes technology governs everything. Ellul, however, is most optimistic. He ultimately believes there is freedom, hope, and purpose for our lives in the midst of a technological society.