

Jacques Ellul on the Duties of a Christian Intellectual

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The first duty of Christian intellectuals today is the duty to **become aware**. It is, in other words, the duty to understand the world and ourselves, inseparably linked and inseparably convicted, in their reality. It means rejecting appearances, information for the sake of information, the abstract phenomenon, the reassuring illusion of progress, and the belief that people and situations can be improved through a kind of good historical fate.

The first act, the first necessity for becoming aware, is a ferocious and passionate destruction of myths, intellectual idols, unconscious rejections of reality, and outmoded and empty doctrines (such as liberalism, fascism, or communism in the political sphere). It means overthrowing this intellectual bourgeois spirit of conformist thinking...

The second element of becoming aware is the will to find the objective reality of the facts and the life that those around me lead. It means creating an authentic realism.

The third element is that this reality must be grasped first on the human level. We must strenuously **refuse** to detach ourselves from this terrain, which is low-lying but alone significant...Intellectuals who want to do their work must today start again at the beginning: with the beings whom they know and first of all with themselves. It is at this level and no other that they must start contemplating the world's situation.

The fourth element of this awareness consists in considering contemporary problems in depth, seeing them as they are, with, on the one hand, the merciless ways of our world and, on the other hand, the situation that they present to us. It is a matter of finding, behind the facts that are projected to our view, the **reality** on which they are based....

Intellectuals who carry out this work absolutely cannot do it in the manner of nineteenth-century liberal intellectuals. They cannot consider themselves observers, on the sidelines, independent with regard to these objects that are human beings and society, indifferent and detached from material conditions and accommodating only their personal passions or observations. Intellectuals who want to become aware must consider themselves on the level of other human beings, along with them, subject to the same laws, influences, and despair, and destined to the same death. And, it is for these people, as well as for themselves, that they must become aware, that they must wake up from this hideous nightmare in which techniques induce the world to slumber. They must consider themselves part of this world whose structure they are uncovering, incorporated into this civilization, revolving along with it, dependent on it, but also perhaps able to change it....

But again, in what name do we say and do these things? How can we bring about this reversal that seems so impossible? To become aware really means to recover in every sphere the reality that our world is looking for. And what can we do on our own in this discussion? What can we understand about this spiritual reality that conditions material reality?...

In short, this entire awareness can come only from the Holy Spirit. ...Whatever effort human beings have undertaken; its meaning and value have come only in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit. Appearances change nothing.

...Nothing that this world offers us is useful for this awareness. What is needed is a **truth** that enlightens human intellect through a greater light. What is needed is an **authority** that leads people necessarily to the act of understanding. What is needed is a **power** that reveals to people the authenticity of the milieu in which each one is placed. All this cannot come from human beings.... Because our civilization is more than human, it becomes necessary to see that it is not constructed by "flesh and blood" but by powers, dominations, "spiritual princes." (Eph. 6:12) But nothing in our intellectual training prepares us to see and understand this. Our intellectual means are purely materialistic and completely inadequate for such deep realization. To be quite precise, there is only the intervention of the Holy Spirit, who can **transform our intellect** in such a way that it will no longer be encompassed within our systems and will be adequately penetrating. Today there is no longer any other possibility...

Christian intellectuals must understand the decisive nature of our era, and that if we give up this awareness that demands our total selves we betray God and the vocation that he called us to.

This awareness, the sole necessary act that Christian intellectuals must undertake today, an act that must constantly be renewed, involves three results when we consider it in its concrete reality. These results are precisely what enable us to say that this awareness, enlightened by the discernment that the Holy Spirit gives, is the answer to present problems. They are what also enable us to evaluate if the awareness that has been produced is indeed genuine. And finally, they are what demonstrate how this awareness is indeed a specifically Christian act. These results are as follows:

- a. To recover the meaning of neighbor,
- b. The meaning of the event...

...the most important act on the social level is to recover the neighbor. Christianity itself leads us there. It is a result of faith. The person before us is no longer merely another human being, but a person for whom Christ died.

It is normal for human beings to be separated and estranged. But the Holy Spirit creates the communication between them and enables this separation to be broken through. Only the Holy Spirit can do it...

This event is God's intervention in the course of this history; it is Jesus Christ. We cannot reduce it to a philosophical formula. That is the great danger that stalks us here, because to do so would reduce this certainty to nothing. We cannot say that it is eternity that has intervened in time, or an abstract God in human beings. What is properly called the event is that the living God became incarnate in the living man, Jesus.

Beginning here and only here is it possible for intellectuals to regain this ground that is indispensable for thought and life, which is the real event....Instead of losing ourselves in vain speculations or political and social agitation of the world's sort, we have here the important and authentic task of Christian intellectuals: through this event, to restore an orientation to the world in the political, social, and other spheres, and, through this event, to enable it to find the hope that does not disappoint.

In summary, in the intellectual sphere, in connection with the political and social spheres, a complete overhaul of all our positions must be carried out. We must begin over. And this reconstruction cannot be the work of a single person or the exclusive work of human beings. This work is necessary, not only for intellectuals, but for everyone, because if Christians do not carry out this work they should not hold out any hope about their position in the social or political world. All that they can do there will be childish, useless, and anachronistic, just like what they are currently doing. It is depressing to see Christians embarking in all of the world's social and political boats with a radical unconsciousness of the preliminary questions, which only they would be able to face.

Christian intellectuals must undertake this enormous questioning, for the world, which is wandering in a labyrinth made by its own hands; for the church, which must finally break its readymade intellectual categories; and for the other members of the church, who must receive authentic teachings about the life of faith. The work of Christian intellectuals is not an abstract pleasure but the effective participation in the preservation of the world and the edification of the church. This is why it cannot be a matter here of just a purely gratuitous exercise. We are not called to [mental] gymnastics. Above all, it is in prayer and meditation that intellectuals will recover the wellsprings of a life of the mind, rooted in what is real.