Translator's Introduction

A Prophet for the Twenty-First Century

Since the beginning of the church, the statement "Jesus is Lord" has always been both a revolutionary political claim and a prophetic assertion. It is revolutionary because Christians have generally understood it to mean that a crucified nobody from Nazareth is in fact the resurrected Son of God (a title reserved for the emperor in the ancient Roman context). Everything—including death—is revalued by Jesus's life. Mary grasped the upheaval implied in Jesus's birth, proclaiming that "he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."[1] It is a prophetic assertion because a simple glance at the way things stand right now (and have stood, at least since the beginning of the church) makes it clear that Jesus's lordship simply does not seem to be the case. The rich exploit the poor; the powerful abuse their power. This radical ecclesial claim must either perpetuate a blind idealism that ignores reality, or a very strange Lordship that apparently leaves existing political structures in place.

It is precisely this revolutionary and prophetic proclamation that serves as the foundation and meaning of Jacques Ellul's theological ethical project. His thinking is deeply marked by this tension between a visceral will towards revolutionary political change, and the prophetic presence of an otherworldly kingdom that expressly refuses any and all violence and domination. As early as *Presence in the Modern World* (1948)—which served as the introduction to the more than sixty books and one thousand articles he would go on to write—Ellul named the Lordship of Jesus Christ as the driving force of what he saw as truly "*revolutionary* Christianity," thus

1. Luke 1:51b–53.

establishing the political pole of this tension. In volume 2 of *To Will & To Do*, whose publication is made possible by a rediscovery of a lost manuscript of Ellul's introduction to Christian ethics, Ellul goes on to develop an ethic for Christians on this theological basis. This volume importantly provides the necessary balance to the political pole of this tension. Here (as nowhere else in his corpus) we see that the *prophetic* dimension of his work was not merely a descriptor applied to his work by others: Ellul consciously conceived of his writing as a contemporary form of prophecy.

This lost volume's coming to light is like stumbling onto buried treasure: its appearance provides a crucial element of ethical thinking from an important voice in twentieth-century Protestant theological ethics, calling readers to re-engage this speaker and give his work a new hearing. To help stage this fresh encounter, this introduction relates the circumstances surrounding the rediscovery and publication of this second volume, briefly recalls its place in Ellul's theological ethics, summarizes its contents, and offers suggestions for what original insight this volume might offer us today.

An Unexpected (Re)discovery[2]

For many years, the very existence of a second part of *To Will & To Do* was uncertain. One of the few indications as to the incomplete character of the published edition of Ellul's introduction to Christian ethics came in his own 1976 preface to *The Ethics of Freedom*.

> This volume . . . is premature inasmuch as the second part of the *Introduction to Ethics* has not yet been published. The first part contained a discussion of the problem of the good and of the relation between the Christian faith, Christian ethics, and other moral systems. The aim in the second part was to sketch the conditions which a Christian ethics should fulfill and to outline the problem of social ethics. A good deal of material has been put together on this, but it now seems that priority should be given to the publication of the first main volume.[3]

"The first main volume" refers to Ellul's three-volume *Éthique de la liberté* (partially translated into English as *The Ethics of Freedom*).

In fact, Ellul had planned his theological ethics in four parts. After a substantial introduction (part one), parts two, three, and four would

2. This section essentially reproduces the account given by Frédéric Rognon in his introduction to the French edition. For fuller detail on the French manuscript, see Rognon, "Introduction," 8–20.

3. Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 7.

comprise an ethical outworking of Saint Paul's trio of faith, hope, and love. For faith, Ellul envisaged an ethics of holiness; for hope, an ethics of freedom; and for love, an ethics of relationship. Unfortunately, this massive project was never completed. Ellul began with *To Will & To Do*, which constitutes his introduction to the whole (though as we now know, only part of it was published). Convinced of its contemporary urgency, he then moved onto *The Ethics of Freedom*, which spans three volumes in French (only two of which are partially rendered in the English translation). A full manuscript of *The Ethics of Holiness* exists; we are hopeful that it will be published in French in coming years, after which it may be translated into English. Ellul never managed to write *The Ethics of Relationship*.

The previously published first part of *To Will & To Do* (volume 1) thus constitutes the first part of Ellul's introduction to Christian ethics. We have seen that he hinted at the existence of a second part, describing its contents and state of at least partial completion. Ellul suggests that this second part would elaborate his overall four-part plan: "This, then, is the plan of the present ethics which I shall have to justify at greater length in the Introduction."[4] But hints like this were scarce and unclear, leaving readers curious but not particularly hopeful for anything further—especially after Ellul's death in 1994.

Then a few years ago, Bernard Rordorf, Honorary Professor of Systematic Theology in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Geneva, found a photocopy of a typed manuscript of *To Will & To Do*, volume two, in his personal archives. He recalled that it was given to him in Montpelier by Daniel Joubert, a first-year student in a literary prep school at the time, perhaps in 1961 or 1962, but certainly before 1964 (the year of *To Will & To Do*'s original French publication). Rordorf believes that, most likely, Ellul circulated this text among a small group of readers to receive feedback before its publication—Ellul and his lifelong friend Bernard Charbonneau, it seems, had already followed a similar procedure with Charbonneau's work *L'État* [*The State*]. Rordorf possessed a full manuscript of both volumes in a similar form. He discarded the manuscript of volume one when it was published. Upon rediscovering the manuscript of the second part, he contacted Frédéric Rognon, Professor of Philosophy of Religions in the Faculty of Protestant Theology at the University of Strasbourg, currently the leading theological scholar on Ellul's work in France. While preparing the text for publication during the 2016–17 academic year, Rognon invited a small group of Ellul scholars (including Elisabetta Ribet, Jean-Sebastien

4. Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 7.

Ingrand, Guillaume Joseph, and myself) to undertake an initial reading of the manuscript.

The 277-page manuscript, beginning at numbered page 250 and ending at page 526, was composed of two chapters: chapter 4, "Conditions and Characteristics of a Christian Ethic," and chapter 5, "The Content of Ethics." This situates the text as a direct continuation of the argument of the published version of *To Will & To Do*. The manuscript had neither footnotes, nor a table of contents, nor a bibliography. Ellul seems to have written the full manuscript straight through, then returned afterwards to polish and add footnotes to the first volume to prepare it for publication, leaving volume two without any notation. Rognon edited the manuscript, adding editorial footnotes and reconstituting a bibliography. The resulting volume was published in January 2018 (with a distinctive title to denote it as a previously unpublished work) as *Les sources de l'éthique chrétienne: Le vouloir et le faire, parties IV et V* (which translates as *The Sources* [or *Springs*] *of Christian Ethics: To Will & To Do, parts IV and V*).

The present translation—following shortly after its initial French publication—thus brings the English edition of Ellul's introduction to Christian ethics to completion for the first time some fifty years after its original translation, putting it fully on par with its French counterpart.

The Conditions, Characteristics, and Content of Christian Ethics

Ellul's two small descriptions of the contents of volume two recounted above indicate some of the major goals that volume two sets out to accomplish. The entirety of *To Will & To Do* divides into five parts, with the first three parts comprising volume one and the last two parts comprising volume two. Parts 1–3 of the first volume included critiques of ethics as a discipline and of what the good is not, descriptions of the different goods adopted by societies, and a discussion of the impossibility and necessity of a Christian ethic. Parts four and five in the present volume approach the conditions, characteristics, and content of Christian Ethics.

Part 4, "Conditions and Characteristics of a Christian Ethic," contains eight chapters. The first addresses "Choice and guidance"—the choice of where to start in formulating an ethic and of what will guide and inform this formulation itself. Ellul concisely notes that only a holistic reading of the biblical Scriptures can fulfill these roles for a reformed Protestant Christian; the rest of the chapter draws out various consequences of this decision.

The remaining seven chapters of this part describe the characteristics of Christian ethics. Chapters 2 and 3 note that this ethic must be both for the individual person, and a communal ethic. These two characteristics are inseparable: Ellul believes that the command of God separates persons from the group, setting them apart. But since this command addresses the entirety of this person, and because this person is always in community, ethics cannot remain solely an individual affair. This constitutes Ellul's answer to the "problem of social ethics" highlighted above (and, as Rognon notes, represents an indirect critique of Paul Ricoeur): simply put, ". . . there is no Christian social ethic"[5] (32).

In chapter 4, Christian ethics is "immediate"—lacking any mediation save that given in Jesus Christ. For Ellul, this implies rejecting any other theological or philosophical concepts, such as middle axioms, "orders of creation," values, natural law, etc., that might compete with Christ as mediator. Christian ethics necessarily proceeds from the person's situation before God as made explicit in Jesus Christ. This chapter also returns to the critiques of the philosophy of values leveled by Ellul in volume one. Chapter 5 teaches that Christian ethics is "specific." Rognon notes that in contrast to some Barthians of his time, Ellul rejects values, morals, or other actions as "bridges between different moralities . . . Christian ethics is irreducible to any other ethics."[6] The Christian revelation leads to a distinctive and unique way of life, despite any similarities it might bear with other moralities.

Stemming from Søren Kierkegaard's influence on Ellul, chapter 6 finds Christian ethics to be an ethics of contradiction. Ellul explicitly rejects any intellectually satisfying systems of thought that might resolve these contradictions. Instead, the Christian's life *is* their response to the contradictions posed to them by divine revelation; the role of ethics is to bring these contradictions to light. Instead of proposing goals, "ends," chapter 7 notes that Christians ethics is "an ethic of means," with "means" broadly designating "everything which ultimately mediates between men" (87). Rather than acting to accomplish something, Christians act to make present something that has already been accomplished. Though God uses whatever means he pleases, Christians are nevertheless tasked with proposing adequate means to the Holy Spirit to accomplish God's purposes. Finally, chapter 8 qualifies this ethic as an eschatological ethic. This means that it cannot be derived purely from creation, nor from the fully realized kingdom of God; it is an

5. See Rognon, "Introduction," *Les sources de l'éthique chrétienne*, 44–45.

6. Rognon, "Introduction," 45. For some of Ellul's critiques of Barthians in the French Reformed Church in reaction to articles in Protestant publications, cf. Ellul, *False Presence of the Kingdom*, 7–9, 15, 43, 80, 106–7.

ethic of the time in-between, of the "penultimate," the "already-but-not-yet."[7] It is thus relative, awaiting the end; but it is also the place where this eschatological end breaks into present history. This tension gives Christian ethics a future, which Christians know and must render present by themselves being a living sign.

Under the overarching title of "The Content of Ethics," the two sections comprising part 5 address "Ethics and the Law" and "Ethics and Theology." Each of the two sections has three chapters.

In section 1, Ellul takes up the classic Protestant question of the functions and roles of the legal texts of the Old testament in Christian ethics. In this discussion, Ellul engages Karl Barth more directly than anywhere else in his corpus; chapter 1, "The Gospel and the Law" (in that order), bears the same title as one of Barth's early essays. In broad agreement with Barth, Ellul notes that the gospel recounted in the New Testament and the Old Testament legal texts are united in that both are the word of God, while also different from one another. While he agrees with Barth's statement that grace is the content of the law, he finds it to be too ambiguous to offer concrete ethical guidelines. Instead, Ellul proposes that the specific act commanded is the content of the law, and grace its signification. This means that we cannot do away with the commands once we have grasped their signification; the letter of the law must be taken very seriously.

Sticking closely with the themes of Barth's essay, chapter 2 tries to understand the ethical meaning of Jesus Christ's *accomplishment* of the law. First, Ellul notes that "accomplished" means "finished": the law cannot condemn us or directly become a morality. It must be lived as it was accomplished by Christ: in love. Furthermore, Ellul joins Barth in saying that the law is both a command and a promise. Its accomplishment renders the law valid and useful *in faith*. Against Calvin, Ellul suggests that this law is not applicable to non-Christians; the law can never be considered in-itself. Second, Ellul reads "accomplished" to imply "completed," which is to say brought to perfection by Christ. Following Wilhelm Vischer, Ellul notes that the law is not moral or religious, but a personal command of Christ. The whole law must therefore be translated into Christian ethics. This "universalizes" the law: it now applies to all Christians, claiming a Christian's whole life without limits. Following Calvin, Ellul sees the law as not abolished, but no longer materially applied. If the ceremonies and juridical components of the Old Testament law cannot be done away with, how ought they be transposed into practice today?

7. Cf. 1 John 3:2; Heb 2:8–9.

Chapter 3 tries to discern law's function in ethics. First, Ellul notes a *negative* function for law. As God's word, the law brings Christians into God's holy presence. The church needs law's constant reminder to align herself with God's promises. Law both brings sin to light, recalling the need for God's grace and love, and points to the cross, to Christ's sacrifice. Beyond this, Ellul explicitly rehabilitates a *positive* role for the law in Christian ethics—an idea that he acknowledges is out of fashion among his interlocutors. Both in Leviticus and in the Sermon on the Mount the law is a gracious charter for new life with God, retaining its pedagogical function. With Barth, Ellul notes that the law as a personal "command" is not an abstract principle, but a path, an "invitation to pursue what God Himself has undertaken" (150). God's command—what Ellul calls here "the only law without obligation or penalty"—presupposes love, teaches holiness, and unites the church with God. The ethicist can neither invent new commands nor leave Christians without concrete guidance, so this command must be made into an objective morality (with "objective" implying "made explicit and shared"). This objective morality is not itself God's commandment; it is relative and limited, but it still calls for obedience and formulates a promise.

Section 2 of part V situates this ethical task in relation to the twofold "sources" of Christian ethics: dogmatics and Scripture. In chapter 1, although Ellul affirms the essential unity of dogmatics and ethics along with Barth, he expresses dissatisfaction with Barth's ethical and political writings, judging that these are not concrete and temporal enough to fulfill the task of ethics. Ellul thus situates ethics as its own domain, subordinate to and limited by dogmatics, yet drawing directly upon Scripture without exclusive mediation by dogmatics.

Chapter 2 revisits Ellul's argument against the use of "Christian principles" in ethical reasoning, critiquing Reinhold Niebuhr's use of love. Ellul is similarly opposed to "kerygmatic ethics" as introducing abstractions into our approach to the Bible. Ellul concludes the chapter with an important critique of Barth's essay "The Christian Community and the Civil Community." Barth famously opposed the use of the *analogia entis*, the "analogy of being," in theological reasoning, yet Ellul sees Barth as using this same reasoning regarding the state.

The final chapter focuses on interpreting Scripture for Christian ethics. Ellul has established that ethics needs to engage Scripture directly, and that it must translate the law into its ethics. He now uses the New Testament language of the *analogia fidei* (or "analogy of faith") to describe this specifically ethical interpretation, seeing ethics as fulfilling the role of the *prophet* as described in the New Testament. This separates him from Barth, who he sees as using the *analogia fidei* as a general interpretive principle. He

ends by proposing a method by which the theological ethicist can perform the prophetic work of translating the law into ethics. This method involves discerning a triple relationship. First, the relation between the eternal will of God and the temporal form (a precept, an institution, etc.) in which this will manifests must be discerned. Second, the ethicist must consider the relation between the lives of people described in Scripture and their faith—that is, how they incarnated their faith in their time and place. Finally, moral theologians must consider how a given human institution, custom, or law is transformed by its incorporation in the law of God. This transformation is instructive for how we might relate to the institutions and customs of our own time and place. Ellul ends by recalling witness as the basic grammar of ethical action, the foundation of all Christian ethics: "All the decisions that the Bible relates to us are ultimately attestations of 'How' to manifest this hidden victory of Jesus Christ in the world" (206).

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What might this volume contribute to theological ethical discussion today? First, Ellul's explicit emphasis on theological ethics as contemporary prophecy fruitfully conceives of the discipline in scriptural categories in a way that heeds specific biblical language without any hint of a nostalgic return to a past era. In fact, this development confirms the insight of many of Ellul's readers as to the prophetic nature of his own work. Whether in the naïve sense of "predicting the future" or in a more nuanced theological register, Ellul has been called a "prophet" from the beginning of his career to the present day. While he was understandably uncomfortable when others designated him as such, his readers have argued for the prophetic value of his work on numerous occasions.[8] Now, twenty-five years after his death, we have a clear statement that Ellul consciously and explicitly conceived of the prophetic character of his theological-ethical work. As I argued in my introduction to volume one, the publication and translation into today's *lingua franca* of *To Will & To Do* signals a truly new moment in the reception of

8. See Ellul and Troude-Chastenet, *Ellul on Politics, Technology, and Christianity*, 106–7. Ellul recounts that he refused to be called a prophet as early as 1939. See also Goddard, "Jacques Ellul: 20th Century Prophet for the 21st Century?," 2–7; the title of the 2012 conference of the International Jacques Ellul Society at Wheaton College, "Jacques Ellul: Prophet in the Technological Wilderness"; and (though this would be to take "prophet" in the vulgar sense that Ellul rejects in the first citation given here) Jean-Luc Porquet, *Jacques Ellul: l'homme qui avait presque tout prévu*, which translates to "Jacques Ellul: the man who predicted almost everything." For more on this, see also Rollison, "Hope, Prophecy, and Prediction in Jacques Ellul's Christian Realism."

Ellul's thought, and hopefully its rediscovery. Part of this rediscovery includes recognizing that Ellul understood his theological project as primarily a work of theological *ethics*, and theological ethics as prophetic. This volume allows us to see just how he both took up the tools offered in Barth's theology and conceived of his own vocation as distinct from Barth and from systematic theology more generally.

Secondly, this text is the only place in Ellul's corpus that examines the analogy of faith, proposing it as a method for adapting the legal texts of Scripture for positive use in ethics. In close discussion with Luther and Calvin, Ellul's approach to the law and the analogy of faith situates him as a creative thinker in the Protestant tradition. This proposition is Ellul's answer to the lacuna he described in *To Will & To Do*, volume 1: namely, that the Protestant tradition has lacked a sufficiently developed ethical approach to Scripture. He rejects both literalism, which would either directly apply biblical legal texts or find a way to set them aside, and approaches mediated by non-scriptural "Christian principles." Instead, without constituting a full doctrine of Scripture, Ellul's ethics of interpretation calls the theological ethicist to the prophetic task of a careful discernment that is faithful to Scripture, demanding holistic attention to the legal texts and thorough engagement with their present time and place. This marks one of Ellul's most concrete contributions to scriptural hermeneutics. Furthermore, it significantly illuminates the terms of our understanding of Ellul's corpus. His conception of law continually evolved throughout his life; this discussion marks at least one well-developed instance of this evolution.[9]

Accordingly, the publication of this present volume issues a call to revisit Ellul's work, whether for the first or the hundredth time. More particularly and provocatively, this text encourages us to hear his oeuvre as a prophetic word addressed to our present moment. If Ellul has done his work well, the whole should strike as a call to action resounding with the revolutionary significance and prophetic impetus of the church's continual cry: "Jesus is Lord!"

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9. See the treatment of law in chapter 6 of Goddard, *Living the Word, Resisting the World: The Life and Thought of Jacques Ellul.*