

# Ellul on Scripture and Idolatry

*by Andrew Goddard*

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One of the distinctive features of Ellul's theological work is his conviction that it is Scripture that enables us to see the world aright. Rather than "demythologizing" the Bible, the Bible is the means by which God "demythologizes" our world. The classic example of this approach is undoubtedly his canonical, Christocentric study of the city in Scripture, *The Meaning of the City* (Eerdmans, 1970), but the same approach underlies his approach to many other phenomena. This article provides a brief introductory overview of how Ellul's reading of some biblical texts shapes his understanding of idols and idolatry and how, in turn, that understanding leads to a critique of certain attitudes to the Bible and explains the heart of his biblical hermeneutic (1).

Ellul's biblical discussion of idols and idolatry is not as thorough and focussed as his study of the city but it is particularly in *The Ethics of Freedom* and *The Humiliation of the Word* that we find his interpretations of key texts in – as one would expect from Ellul – both Old and New Testaments. Of particular interest is one Pauline text that shapes his account of the idols in relation to the powers (2). On first glance, we Christians may want to treat idols and powers as synonymous terms and it must be admitted that Ellul himself (here, as in many other areas) is not always consistent and does not always strictly follow his own distinctions that he draws from the biblical text. Nevertheless, when he is careful, he does distinguish his understanding of these two phenomena and he does so because he believes Scripture does so.

The crucial biblical text for Ellul is Paul's discussion of food offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8, especially verses 4 to 6. There the apostle writes, "Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that 'no idol in the world really exists,' and that 'there is no God but one.' Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth-- as in fact there are many gods and many lords-- yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist."

Ellul takes great care in his analysis of this text, drawing attention to the paradox that Paul here seems to say both (a) that no idol really exists and (b) that there are many

gods. Rather than dismiss Paul's statements as incoherent and confused, Ellul seeks to clarify why Paul affirms both these statements. He claims that gods exist in the following sense: "They are part of the powers that claim to be all-powerful or salvific, etc, and that attract people's love and religious belief. They exist. And they pass themselves off as gods" (*The Humiliation of the Word* (Eerdmans, 1985), p 89). Thus Ellul believes that in order to understand the text and the world we have to see that the language of 'gods' is equivalent to (or, perhaps better, a subset of) the category of the powers. As a result, Ellul insists – against the demythologizers and with such writers as Caird, Berkhof, Wink and Stringfellow – that there are real, spiritual powers and forces which influence human lives and societies. These, we learn from Scripture, set themselves up as powerful and redemptive and, by being viewed as such by humans, they stand as a challenge to the one true God.

In his interpretation of Scripture on the powers, Ellul rejects the Bultmannian demythologization project (that dismisses the language of powers as a worldview we must now reject in the light of modern knowledge) but he also refuses to embrace the common popular evangelical and fundamentalist belief in traditional demons that is often understood as the main alternative. Instead he moves between two other ways of interpreting this biblical language of "gods" and "powers." At times he views them as "less precise powers (thrones and dominions) which still have an existence, reality, and...objectivity of their own." Here they are seen as authentic, spiritual realities which are independent of human decision and whose power is not constituted by human decision. At other times – particularly in his later writings – the powers are viewed more as "a disposition of man which constitutes this or that human factor a power by exalting it as such" (*The Ethics of Freedom* (Eerdmans, 1976), p 151) and so "not objective realities which influence man from without. They exist only by the determination of man which allows them to exist in their subjugating otherness and transcendence" (*Ethics*, pp. 151-2).

Ellul's concern in this understanding is to avoid the idea of powers or demons doing their own work apart from human beings. He therefore stresses that the powers find expression in human works and enterprises. It is this important link between the spiritual powers and the material world, especially of human works, that helps us to understand his view of idols. "The powers seem to be able to transform a natural, social, intellectual or economic reality into a force which man has no ability either to resist or to

control. This force ejects man from his divinely given position as governor of creation. It gives life and autonomy to institutions and structures. It attacks man both inwardly and outwardly by playing on the whole setting of human life. It finally alienates man by bringing him into the possession of objects which would not normally possess him" (*Ethics*, pp 152-3).

These powers are the false gods that Paul says in 1 Cor 8 really exist. But what are "idols" and why does Paul say that they do not exist? The key feature of idols – in contrast to the powers to which they are linked – is that they are visible and material entities. Although this would seem to give them a more substantial existence, Ellul argues that idols do not exist because "the visible portrayal of these powers which is perceived by the senses, has no value, no consistency, and no existence" (*Humiliation*, p. 89). Any idol is really just "a natural, social intellectual or economic reality." It is strictly a material object under human control. Ellul therefore believes that Scripture distinguishes false gods from idols because the latter are simply "a creation of man which he invests with a value and authority they do not have in themselves" (*Ethics*, p. 156). Idols, according to Scripture, are simply part of the visible created reality and though linked to the gods or spiritual powers they are to be distinguished from them.

In explaining how it is that, in Paul's words, "no idol in the world really exists," Ellul gives the example of money. He claims that money as a power (Mammon) certainly exists. However, a banknote – the material means by which the power works - strictly does not exist because "it is never anything but a piece of paper" (*Humiliation*, p. 89). Here we see a central paradox: idols seek to make the invisible false gods and powers visible and concrete but by this very fact of seeking to mediate a spiritual power in the material world they do not themselves exist. We may today think of the Nike Swoop, the McDonalds Golden Arches or other symbols and logos as contemporary idols which on their own are meaningless and powerless but are mediators of some of the global powers of our age (3).

Faced with them we need to remember that idols are not only part of the ancient biblical world but still a reality in our post-modern "secular" world and to recall Ellul's judgment based on Paul's words: "They exist neither as something visible and concrete (since in this sense they are really nothing) nor as something spiritual... (since they cannot reach this level). They have no kind of existence precisely because they have tried to obtain indispensable existence beyond the uncertainty of the word" (*Humiliation*, p. 89).

Idols therefore, according to Scripture, lack existence per se and are the attempt by humans to domesticate and bring into the visible, material world the invisible spiritual powers that do exist. "Idols are indispensable for mankind. We need to see things represented and make the powers enter our domain of reality. It is a sort of kidnapping. False gods are powers of all sorts that human beings discern in the world. The Bible clearly distinguishes these from the idol, which is the visualization of these powers and mysterious forces . . . Things that can be seen and grasped are certain and at our

disposition. It is fundamentally unacceptable for us to be at the disposition of these gods ourselves, and unable to have power over them. Prayer or offering cannot satisfy, since they provide no sure domination. If, on the contrary, a person makes his own image and can certify that it is truly the deity, he is no longer afraid. Idols quiet our fears" (*Humiliation*, pp. 86-7).

This linking of idols to the material or visual, as distinct from the spiritual powers, leads to the second emphasis in Ellul's interpretation of the biblical witness: the priority of listening over seeing.

Ellul reads the narrative of humanity's primal rebellion in Genesis 3 as demonstrating the significance of this – the spoken word is doubted and visible reality is taken as the source of truth (see *Humiliation*, pp. 97ff). The same problem is repeated within God's people Israel. Here Ellul's interpretation of the narrative of the golden calf (Exodus 32) is of crucial importance. It also illustrates that, although (as in relation to 1 Cor 8) Ellul can take great care and wrestle with the literal or plain sense of the biblical text he is also willing to offer a more spiritual interpretation in order to discern Scripture's message. Thus, drawing on a study of Fernand Ryser (a French translator of two of the great influences on Ellul's theology and biblical interpretation – Barth and Bonhoeffer), he highlights that a source of the gold for the calf is the Israelite's ear-rings (v2). He quotes Ryser, "Aaron dishonours the ear; it no longer counts; now just the eye matters. Hear the Word of God no longer matters; now seeing and looking at an image are central. Sight replaces faith" (*Humiliation*, p. 87). It is this attempt to argue for a biblical basis for the priority of the word and hearing over the material image and sight that is a central theme of *The Humiliation of the Word* as a whole and of its exegesis of key biblical passages.

Finally, Ellul's claim for a biblically based prioritization of hearing over seeing must also be applied to the Bible itself. Although Scripture and biblical interpretation play a central part in Ellul's theology and ethics he is clear that Scripture, as a permanent, written record has the ambiguity of all written words Drawing on the biblical narrative of Moses breaking the stone tablets (Exodus 32.19), Ellul is adamant that this challenges a common Christian attitude to the Bible for the Bible "is never automatically and in itself the Word of God, but is always capable of becoming that Word – and as a Christian I would add: in a way denied to all other writings" (*Living Faith* (Harper & Row, 1983), p 128).

Rather, than treating the Bible as a visible divine word Ellul insists that "The destruction of this single, visible, material representation of God ought to remind us continually that the Bible in its materiality is not the Word of God made visible through reading. God...has not made his Word visible...The Bible is not a sort of visible representation of God...God's Word must remain a fleeting spoken Word, inscribed only in the human hear . . ." (*Humiliation*, p. 63).

Of course, as Ellul acknowledges elsewhere, God has in fact made his Word visible but he has done so uniquely in the person of Jesus Christ and it is, therefore, Christ the incarnate Word who is the key to the Scriptures.

Ellul, therefore throughout his interpretation of biblical texts works with a thoroughly theological and Christo-centric hermeneutic and a relative disregard for the tools of historical-critical study (4).

Ellul's biblical interpretation of some texts relating to idols and idolatry demonstrates that although Scripture plays a central role in his theology, his theological interpretation of those texts also makes him aware of the danger that Scripture may itself become an idol, a means of escaping the spoken Word of the living God. Ellul therefore challenges us to take Scripture seriously but not ultimately seriously, for ultimate seriousness is to be paid to the Word become flesh to whom Scripture – the Word written – bears witness and it is the living Word not the dead letter that is to be our concern. As a result, Christians are called to participate in a believing and attentive listening to hear the Word of God address us in and through the words of Scripture and to be confident that that Word is one which

liberates us from the powers and unmask all our idols as simply “the works of our hands”.

#### End Notes

(1) For a fuller discussion of this, on which this article partially draws, see my forthcoming article in Stephen Barton (ed), *Idolatry in the Bible, Early Judaism and Christianity* (T&T Clark, 2005).

(2) The powers are a subject on which Ellul wrote much more extensively and which, particularly through the work of Marva Dawn, have become prominent in recent Ellul studies.

(3) I am grateful to Alain Coralie for his work on Nike Culture that has helped me make this connection.

(4) For Ellul's fullest account of hermeneutics see his “Innocent Notes on ‘The Hermeneutic Question’ in Marva Dawn's translation and commentary on a number of Ellul articles, *Sources and Trajectories* (Eerdmans, 1997), pp 184-203.

## If You Are the Son of God!

*by Andy Alexis-Baker*

**Review of Jacques Ellul, *Si tu es le Fils de Dieu: Souffrances et tentations de Jésus*. Paris: Centurion & Zurich: Brockhaus Verlag, 1991. 110 pp.**

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*Si tu es le Fils de Dieu: Souffrances et tentations de Jésus (If You Are the Son of God: The Sufferings and Temptations of Jesus)* is probably one of Jacques Ellul's least read works. A search through the WorldCat database indicated that only fifteen libraries worldwide own a copy. When I went to the Notre Dame library, which has a copy, I found it snug in the shelf, with crisp clear pages, as if it had never been moved since initial shelving, let alone read by a single soul. Perhaps this is partially due to the fact that this work has never been translated into English. I have taken up that task and have completed a version and hope to get it published before long. I will be using my own English translation when I quote Ellul in this review.

Having lived with this work for some time now, I am convinced that it is one of Ellul's most important works. First, this book is his most extended meditation on the life and work of Jesus Christ. Second, this particular meditation on the sufferings and temptations of Jesus provides some

rather unique biblical interpretations that add a lot to our understanding. Finally, this book makes a great introduction to Ellul's thought. All of the themes found in his other works are found here: technique, arguments for a kind of biblically based anarchism, placing Jesus at the center of every thought, personalism, etc.

The book is divided into three parts: Introduction; Sufferings; Temptations. At the outset of the book, Ellul claims that Christians have not retained the “total life and teachings of Jesus, the reality: He suffered.” This can be seen for example in the way we recite and write down the Creed. We say that, “He suffered under Pontius Pilate” (p. 9). But Ellul claims that this is a distortion of the Latin construction and theologically unsound. The Latin construction is: “He suffered; under Pontius Pilate he was crucified.” This reading brings out the fact that Jesus was the Suffering Servant throughout his life. Our version makes suffering a momentary event for Jesus, that is salvific in and of itself.

But Ellul's purpose in this meditation is not to create a “theology of suffering.” For Ellul it is not a question of us participating in Jesus' sufferings, but of Jesus participating in ours. A theology of suffering leads to a kind of “morbid orientation” in Christianity: we focus on the gore of the cross and make Jesus into an ethereal creature who could endure great suffering, suffering which in and of itself saves us.