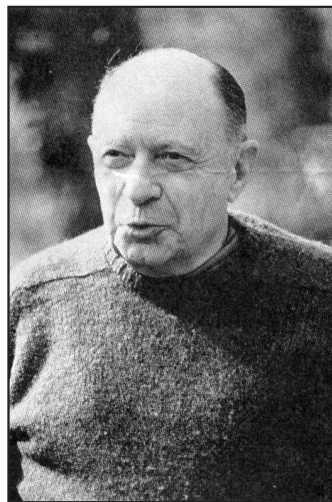


# 14

## The Totality of Condemnation Fell on Christ

*Universal Salvation in Jacques Ellul*

(1912–1994)



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ANDREW GODDARD

### Introducing Ellul and His Work

**T**HE FRENCH REFORMED LAY theologian Jacques Ellul is probably better known for his original and insightful work in social analysis and critique rather than in theology and yet his wrestling with issues of hell and universal salvation offer some original insights for contemporary

theology. In one sense the focus on his sociological works is not surprising given his area of academic expertise. His original degree was in law and, from the end of the Second World War until his retirement in 1980, he served as the Professor of the History and Sociology of Institutions in the Law Faculty of Bordeaux University as well as being Professor in the Institute of Political Studies. In contrast, he never held a teaching position in academic theology and lacked any formal qualification in the subject. He had taken a correspondence course in theology through Strasbourg University during the Second World War but although this involved spending a year reading Calvin, Ellul failed to write the thesis necessary to be awarded the degree. It would, however, be wrong to conclude he was a theological illiterate or lightweight. In addition to his active involvement in the French Reformed Church and World Council of Churches over many decades, he served on the editorial board of *Foi et Vie*, the major Barthian French theological journal, from 1950. Then, in 1969, on the death of the theologian Jean Bosc, Ellul succeeded him as editor (at Bosc's request), a post he held until 1985. He not only served as editor of *Foi et Vie*, but between 1939 and his death in 1994 he contributed over seventy articles to this journal in addition to writing for a range of other theological journals and publishing over two dozen books (approximately half of his published works) in the areas of theology, ethics, and biblical studies.

Ellul's corpus of over fifty published books needs to be viewed as a whole—he once described how he had really written one long book in which each individual book was a chapter! It also needs to be understood as what he called "a composition in counterpoint" in which there are two strands in dialogue with each other throughout. There is a sociological strand that seeks to understand the contemporary world and a biblical/theological strand that reflects on that world and seeks to develop a theology, an ethic, and a reading of Scripture in and for that world. His theology is therefore very much a contextual theology which is in constant dialogue—and often dialectical tension—with his sociological studies. He does not therefore offer his readers a rigorous or systematic theology.

Ellul's originality in relation to his social analysis and critique is focussed on the fact that, from his involvement in the French personalist movement in the early 1930s and influenced by Karl Marx's methodology, he developed an understanding in which Technique (rather than

capital) was the driving force and power in the twentieth century world. Beginning with his classic text, *La Technique* (1954, but only becoming famous when appearing in English in 1964 as *The Technological Society*), he traced how our concern for means without reference to ends and our zeal for efficiency was destroying traditional civilization. His analysis of how this reality is expressed in all areas of life—most notably our means of communication (*Propaganda*, ET 1965) and political structures (*The Political Illusion*, ET 1967)—contains so many insights that a recent study describes Ellul as the man who foresaw almost everything.<sup>1</sup>

In an important contrast to the theological optimism that this chapter explores, these sociological works are widely seen as highly pessimistic, with some suggesting he has transferred a traditional Christian vision of hell from the eschaton into human history. However, although the overall tenor of his analysis of our world is indisputably quite bleak, it must be recognised that Ellul portrays contemporary humanity's subjection to technique, the state, and other powers with the goal of raising awareness of our plight and encouraging resistance and creation of alternatives, not of engendering hopelessness and pessimism. In addition, his theological works are primarily an attempt to hear and proclaim the life-giving and freedom-giving Word of God in this world of death and enslavement-to-necessity so that Christians resist the current forms of the principalities and powers and offer alternatives rooted in the hope that comes from Jesus Christ.

If Karl Marx is the primary inspiration for Ellul's sociological studies, Karl Barth, along with Kierkegaard, is the primary inspiration for the theological strand of his works. It was not always so. Following his conversion in the early 1930s, Ellul was initially drawn to Calvin as his main guide in theology. Then, around 1935, Ellul met Jean who introduced him to Barth's writing and he read Barth's *The Word of God and the Word of Man*.<sup>2</sup> By 1952, Ellul was already sufficiently immersed in Barth to write an article on Barth's *Dogmatics* being published in French translation which urged other French lay people to engage with his work.<sup>3</sup> It was, Ellul later confessed, Barth who played a crucial part in his becoming a universalist: "when I rethink my progress these last 20

1. Jean-Luc Porquet, *Jacques Ellul*.

2. Ellul, *In Season*, 78.

3. Ellul, "La dogmatique."

years, it seems that I received from him two great principles: freedom and universal salvation.”<sup>4</sup>

The occasional, contextual, and practical focus of Ellul’s theological work makes it difficult to give an account of his theology as a whole or to provide a systematic analysis of his understanding of any particular Christian doctrine. However, his belief in universalism is one of the few areas—perhaps because it represented a significant change in his own theology to a position that many would think heretical and which thus required explanation—where it is possible to trace the development of his thought and to outline the arguments he developed to defend his conclusions.

### Ellul’s Theological Pilgrimage to Universalism

Ellul is quite clear, although it is not possible to trace any written evidence, that early in his Christian discipleship he followed Calvin and, far from being a universalist, believed in double predestination. So, in the interviews published as *In Season, Out of Season*, he explained that “it is absolutely impossible for me to believe *any longer* in double predestination”<sup>5</sup> and he had earlier confessed that “I had partaken of a strict Calvinist idea of predestination.”<sup>6</sup> His explanations as to why he held that view are important given some of his later arguments for universalism: the need for God to express both his justice and his love and so “justice should be expressed in the damnation of those who are created for damnation.”<sup>7</sup> He also honestly admits that his position was not simply theological but that his character originally drew him to such a position,<sup>8</sup> supported by his committed political stances: “I have to admit that there was also an element of rebellion, of hatred of certain political actions that naturally made me divide the world in two . . . I couldn’t accept salvation for Nazis,

4. Ellul, “Karl Barth and Us,” 24.

5. Ellul, *In Season*, 75 (italics added).

6. Ellul, “Karl Barth and Us,” 24. Ellul later believed predestination “transforms the biblical God into destiny, Ananke, etc. And this derives from Muslim thinking” (Ellul, *Subversion*, 108).

7. Ellul, *In Season*, 76. Also, “I used to believe that God’s judgment separated the lost, the condemned (to show God’s justice), from others who were saved (to show God’s love)” (Ellul, *In Season*, 58).

8. “All of my character took me rather toward the double predestination of Calvin” (Ellul, “Karl Barth and Us,” 24).

and later, for communists. They seemed to me totally outside of God's love. Therefore Calvin was right."<sup>9</sup> This statement highlights how views on eternal destiny and universal salvation are often influenced by other than purely theological factors but it does not clarify when or why his own position began to change. The fact that Ellul proceeds to describe his encounter with Bosc and, through him, Barth's theology, suggests such views may have been held for only a short time in the mid-1930s. However, Troude-Chastenet cites personal correspondence from Ellul which claims that it was only in the 1950s, under the influence of the Barthian school, that he rejected double predestination.<sup>10</sup>

Even if Ellul rejected double predestination before the 1950s, his two theological books from that decade show both that he had not yet fully embraced universalism but also that his thought was developing in ways that would, in the following decade, help lead him to that conclusion.

In 1952, in a special edition of *Foi et Vie*, Ellul offered his first detailed study of a biblical book—Jonah. Its message of God's shocking grace to the outsider and the hated enemy in the form of the people of Nineveh must have been unsettling if he still believed in double predestination and had categories of people whom he viewed as "totally outside of God's love." He acknowledged this in his 1988 interview with Daniel Clendenin:

Ellul: Toward pagan people, for example, we do not say to them, "Be converted or you will be damned," but rather, "I'm telling you that you are loved by God."

Clendenin: That was Jonah's hard lesson, that God loved even the Ninevites! No one is excluded.

Ellul: Yes.<sup>11</sup>

However, in his reflection on Jonah, Ellul is quite happy to talk of hell as existing (in contrast to his later denials of this) but there is also the recognition that hell is not a place of God's absence. Instead of denying hell's reality, he interprets Jonah's experience in the big fish as showing that "hell, like everything else, obeys God," and claims that, though Jonah "is in the depths of hell" when he cries out to God, "God will

9. Ellul, *In Season*, 77–78.

10. Troude-Chastenet, *Lire Ellul*, 151.

11. Clendenin, "Interview" reproduced in Anon, "Freedom and Universal Salvation."

bring him out of this situation from which there is no exit.”<sup>12</sup> With a reference to Holy Saturday and echoes of the thought of writers such as Balthasar (see chapter 16), Ellul asserts that “hell does not merely obey this almighty Lord; it is also open to him. As we enter it, God also enters it so as not to leave us alone . . . Hell is no longer closed. It is no longer the stronghold where Satan guards his triumphs. Hell is robbed of its certainties.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite these significant moves, there are also signs that hell is not totally emptied simply by God’s decree and activity. There are still echoes of a more Calvinist doctrine of election and at least single predestination when, rather than making a universal statement about humanity, he writes that “Jesus does not abandon *those who have been given him by his Father*. He goes to look for them where they are, in the depths of their condemnation.”<sup>14</sup> There is also a sense that human decision is important for someone to be saved. Although Ellul stresses that we are not separated from God when plunged into death and hell, his statement that “nothing can put a barrier between us and our Saviour” is qualified by the immediate addition of the statement, “once a little movement on our part has restored this link which God patiently re-establishes for us.”<sup>15</sup> As we shall see, once Ellul was committed to universalism, there was no need for even “a little movement on our part” to secure our salvation because the movement is wholly from God to humanity and the link is fully re-established by God himself in the Incarnation.

Although there are these important qualifications, the final pages of Ellul’s study provide a strong and clear statement of the universality of God’s salvific will that establish the potential for a more developed universalism—“The salvation granted to Jonah from the depths of hell is what God has decided for all. Thus Jonah in his adventure, in his very life, proclaims the decision of salvation which is for all (*la decision du salut, qui deviendra universel*).”<sup>16</sup> This, like his reading of Jonah as a whole, is the fruit of his Christocentric hermeneutic and theology and there is a strong sense of human solidarity: “The bond is that of Adam and all men in perdition, but it is also that between Jesus Christ and all

12. Ellul, *Jonah*, 54.

13. *Ibid.*, 55.

14. *Ibid.* (italics added).

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 102.

men in the salvation which is accomplished here.”<sup>17</sup> However, just as in Paul’s account of this solidarity in Romans 5, where he also writes of “those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness” (Rom 5:17), so here Ellul’s potentially universalist statements are qualified either in scope or certainty as he refers to the need for repentance and how Christ has “has to come forth from death by resurrection in order that all men might follow him (*tous les hommes puissant en sortir derrière lui*).”<sup>18</sup>

The reality and nature of hell and eternal condemnation is most graphically explored by Ellul in his study of money published in 1954. Ellul here reflects on the frightening words of James 5:1–3 against the rich. He is quite emphatic that “we are thus in the presence of a final, eternal condemnation”<sup>19</sup> and that the means of this condemnation is fire. He sees the logic and justice of this condemnation in that it gives people what they want: “The person tied to money is devoured by the money itself. A terrible justice gives the rich over to what they wanted to possess. Wanting money above all else, they will be joined forever to it. They will be possessed by it, turned over defenceless to it, so that its fate will be their own—rusty money, doomed to destruction.”<sup>20</sup>

Rather than the victory of divine love, Ellul here contrasts the attitude of the rich to the way of love and is clear that “if the rich do not need God’s love on earth, they will not find it in heaven either.”<sup>21</sup> The final judgment does not bring about a radical discontinuity and separation between humans, their works, and the powers as in his later writing. Rather, “this is a simple continuity. It is logical and regular, we could even say normal.”<sup>22</sup> Nor, importantly, does he conceive of this “hell” as somewhere God is not—the rich here are condemned to a situation in which they are “deprived of God’s consolation and love while standing in his presence” and this “is itself the devouring fire.”<sup>23</sup>

The final judgment is not a divine liberation from destructive powers which enslave human beings but a handing over of unrepentant

17. *Ibid.*, 103.

18. *Ibid.*, 102.

19. Ellul, *Money*, 140.

20. *Ibid.*, 140.

21. *Ibid.*, 141.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

humans to such powers: the condemned rich are “delivered, with no further appeal, to the destruction of money.” Death brings a finality to human choices that is irrevocable and confirmed by God: “On earth, when people offer themselves to money, there is always the possibility that they will change their course and open themselves to God. Nothing is yet final. But with death, the situation that people want becomes definitive. This is how it is a devouring fire: people stay eternally, with no possibility of change, with the comforter they have chosen. They are thus outside the kingdom of God.”<sup>24</sup>

The contrast here with his later thinking could not be starker. He will later be clear that he believes in the “kingdom where all humanity will enter, without exception”<sup>25</sup> and that “Money is damned rather than the rich person.”<sup>26</sup> Despite this vivid account of hell, by the late 1950s, in an article relating his work on propaganda to evangelism, Ellul condemns the preaching of hell, though he does so *not* on the grounds that hell does not exist but on the basis that those who “fall to their knees at the sinners’ bench following this style of preaching are obeying psychological mechanisms.”<sup>27</sup>

In his next theological book, *False Presence of the Kingdom*, published in French in 1963, Ellul still believes in the reality of damnation. Critiquing the view that Christians need to be present to the world even at the risk of losing themselves, he appears to hold such eternal loss is possible and certainly does not reject the idea on the basis of assured universal salvation. He writes of the error of accepting “perdition for oneself” and warns that “to submit to losing the salvation obtained in Jesus Christ is precisely to scorn the entire work of Jesus Christ. It is to scorn the incarnation and crucifixion. It is to forget what it cost God to save each one of us. If, as Jesus tells us, there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, we should consider all the pain and misery there is in heaven over a righteous person who allows himself to be lost.”<sup>28</sup> Rather than speaking of universal salvation, he responds to—and dismisses—Calvinist claims about election giving assurance that one cannot be lost and starkly warns that, “To allow oneself to be damned out of love for

24. Ibid.

25. Ellul, *In Season*, 76.

26. Ellul, *Humiliation*, 59.

27. Ellul, “Evangelisation,” 158.

28. Ellul, *False*, 41.



the other person could eventually result in two damned people, never in one saved person!”<sup>29</sup>

All this changed in the next few years. Troude-Chastenet, presumably based again on personal correspondence, notes that it was when Ellul began a series of biblical studies on the book of Revelation in 1965 that he moved towards accepting universal salvation.<sup>30</sup> When his study of the book of 2 Kings—*The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*—was published in France in 1966, although there is no explicit statement of belief in universal salvation such as found in his later writing, his move towards universalism was clearly signalled.

The book as a whole is far removed from a traditional decretal Calvinist view of a controlling divine sovereignty over human history and eternal destiny. It shows the influence of Barth, with Ellul noting that 2 Kings “displays concretely the play of what Karl Barth has called the free determination of man in the free decision of God.”<sup>31</sup> As part of this framework, in discussing the prophet Elisha’s condemnations in his study of Joram in 2 Kings 6:24–7:17, Ellul introduces a crucial distinction in his reading of Scripture and his theology of judgment. Elisha’s prophecy (2 Kgs 7:2) is a judgment which condemns the king’s officer to death and Ellul asks about what this means for “ultimate salvation”—“Do the words pronounced against the officer and the king, as Words of God, carry with them the eternal damnation of these men?”<sup>32</sup> Pointing to arguments he would develop later when explicitly defending universalism, he paraphrases that question in terms of God becoming “no longer God-with-them” and asks about whether the judgment does “not necessarily imperil the salvation of these two men for whom Jesus also dies.”<sup>33</sup> His answer is a clear limitation of the words to the *temporal* sphere: “My own conviction is that in all this we simply have a rejection in time, a condemnation for the moment, not eternal damnation. They are thus condemned but not damned. They are put outside God’s work but not his love.”<sup>34</sup>

29. *Ibid.*, 43.

30. Troude-Chastenet, *Lire Ellul*, 151.

31. Ellul, *Politics*, 15.

32. *Ibid.*, 53–54.

33. *Ibid.*, 54.

34. *Ibid.*

There is still a divine refusal and rejection—Ellul never denies or downplays this element of biblical revelation—but this is not understood to be eternal: “God rejects him, but he does not send him to hell. He discards him as an instrument he cannot use . . . The first man called is not outside God’s love nor outside salvation in Christ. But he is out of work.”<sup>35</sup> Although this move and these statements do not necessarily entail the certainty of universal salvation, Ellul is certainly pointing in that direction and many of the central pieces of his later and fuller articulation of universalism are already in place. Indeed, at one point, he signals how unthinkable it is becoming for him to be other than universalist when he acknowledges the reality of God’s anger and jealousy but then expounds it in the following terms: “God is still a jealous God. That is to say, he loves to such a degree that he cannot bear it that his creature should not finally be saved. He cannot bear it that man should turn to someone other than himself . . . He requires that man should finally return completely to him, whatever this may cost.”<sup>36</sup>

Before exploring Ellul’s defence more systematically, his final explicit arrival at a convinced universalism and his subsequent repeated articulation of it needs to be noted. In the opening volume of his *Ethics of Freedom*, published in French in 1973, he clearly asserts, I believe for the first time explicitly in his writing, his belief in universal salvation: “Even though I could hardly teach it as a dogmatic truth, I might accept the fact that all men are saved by Christ . . . Even while I admit the theological and biblical difficulties which this opinion involves, it might still seem that this is a gracious gift to all men and all ages by the God who is love.”<sup>37</sup>

This message becomes increasingly prominent in his work as, despite his repeated claims that he does not teach it, he frequently proclaims his belief in universal salvation. The biblical origins are most obvious in his study of the book of Revelation published in 1975. As already noted it was, astonishingly given much of its content (most notably Rev

35. Ibid., 55.

36. Ibid., 108.

37. Ellul, *Ethics*, 82. The original French is even clearer and stronger: “J’admettrais, sans pouvoir cependant l’enseigner comme vérité dogmatique, que tous les hommes sans en excepter un seul, soient sauvés en Christ . . . Et je pense que ceci est *donné* par grace à tout homme, même non croyant, pour toute époque, par le Dieu qui est Amour. C’est ce que je crois, sans me dissimuler les difficultés théologiques et bibliques que cela rencontre” (Ellul, *Ethique*, 94).

14:9–11), the study of this book which was the biblical source of his embracing of universal salvation: “I believe there are no damned and I see this in the Apocalypse.”<sup>38</sup>

By 1977, he was emphatically telling an interviewer for *Le Monde*, “I am absolutely and radically convinced of universal salvation, whether or not people believe,”<sup>39</sup> a theme he returned to regularly in later interviews.<sup>40</sup> A year later, as already noted, in his reflections on Barth’s influence he emphasises his importance in relation to the move to universalism, noting, though sadly without further elaboration, that “For me, reading the excellent volume of the *Dogmatics* dedicated to Judas was the final illumination.”<sup>41</sup>

From the 1970s onwards, Ellul regularly refers to his belief in universal salvation but it was not until he wrote *Ce que je crois* in 1987 (ET *What I Believe*, 1989) that he offered a detailed account and defence of his view in the first of three chapters—entitled “Universal Salvation”—exploring his beliefs about the eschaton. That account, together with briefer comments elsewhere, enables the central theological themes of Ellul’s final settled universalism to be identified.

### Ellul’s Defence of Universalism

Ellul’s defence of universalism has three central theological foundations—the omnipresent love of God, the comprehensive reconciling work of Christ, and God’s separating and salvific judgment.

#### *The Omnipresent Love of God*

In his 1978 discussion of how Barth enabled him to discover universal salvation, Ellul claims that Barth “progressively discovered the impossibility of a hell where God was not, the impossibility of maintaining two

38. Ellul, *Conférence*, 82, citing Rev 7. The issue and underlying theology of judgment and salvation appear throughout the commentary but at their most focussed in Ellul, *Apocalypse*, 211–13 and the accompanying footnote on pp. 275–76.

39. Ellul, “Entretien.”

40. See Ellul, *In Season*, 58, 75–78, 82, 211–12; Ellul, *Perspectives*, 104; Ellul, *Jacques Ellul*, 111–13.

41. Ellul, “Karl Barth and Us,” 24. The reference is to Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* 2/2, 35.4, 458–506. Originally published in 1942, it appeared in English in 1957 and in French in 1958.

faces of God, of separating the God of justice from the God of love."<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, these two points are also how he opens his fullest defence of his universalism, nearly a decade later. There, under the heading "God Is Love," he writes, "My first simple thesis is that if God is God, the Almighty, the Creator of all things, the Omnipresent, then we can think of no place or being whatever outside him."<sup>43</sup> He then proceeds to argue that hell cannot exist as either it is within God "in which case he is not universally good" or it is outside him which is "completely unthinkable."<sup>44</sup>

Although this raises the important question of how any "hell" is to be related to God's omnipresence and benevolence, it does not address the fact that both options Ellul here dismisses have a place in Scripture and the Christian tradition as ways of conceiving eternal punishment. The first—that hell is somehow in the presence of God, despite his goodness and love—is the image given in Revelation 14:9–11 ("tormented with fire . . . in the presence of the Lamb") and a form of this conception of hell was clearly articulated by Ellul in his discussion of the damnation of the rich when, as noted above, he wrote of them being "deprived of God's consolation and love while standing in his presence." The second option of exclusion from God's presence is the imagery Jesus himself uses in Matthew when some who claim to have prophesied in his name are told "Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matt 7:23) and the goats in the parable—which Ellul acknowledges is a parable "in which hell and eternal punishment are central"<sup>45</sup>—are told "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt 25:41). While both these images and explanations face philosophical and theological challenges, it is surprising, given their biblical basis and Ellul's normal respect for Scripture, that Ellul believes they can be so summarily dismissed.

Ellul's insistence that God "shows his love, above all in Jesus Christ, which makes Hell impossible,"<sup>46</sup> also needs to respond to a further challenge: that God is not only love, he is also *just*. As noted, in his earlier

42. Ellul, "Karl Barth and Us," 24.

43. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 189.

44. So, "As I see it, this position is theologically indisputable: if God is God and if God is love, nothing is outside of the love of God. A place like hell is thus inconceivable. The worst of human beings is still necessarily in the love of God" (Ellul, *In Season*, 212).

45. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 195.

46. Ellul, *Jacques Ellul*, 112.

writings, influenced by Calvinism, Ellul himself held to such a belief and thus to the reality of eternal condemnation, even to a double predestination, to express these two characteristics. Once he embraced universalism he rejected this on three main grounds. First, as in the passage quoted above in relation to what he learned from Barth, he often argued that this contrast of divine love and divine justice produces a two-faced God.<sup>47</sup> Although Ellul (unlike some universalists) is careful not to deny the reality of God's just wrath expressed in human history, he refuses to allow it to be eternal. Quoting texts such as Psalm 103:9, Jeremiah 3:5, 12 and Micah 7:18 to show that God does not reject forever and is not angry forever<sup>48</sup> he challenges those who reject universal salvation: "A wrath continuing for ever? Have we not seen the impossibility of considering that the New Creation, that admirable symphony of love, could exist *beside* the world of wrath? Is God still double-faced: a visage of love turned toward his celestial Jerusalem and a visage of wrath turned toward this 'hell'? Are then the peace and joy of God complete, since he continues as a God of wrath and of fulmination?"<sup>49</sup>

Second, Ellul argues that God's justice is not a retributive and punitive justice. Indeed, "if he is the just judge, the pitiless justiciar, he is not the God that Jesus Christ has taught us to love."<sup>50</sup> Writing as a lawyer, whose first published book was *The Theological Foundation of Law*, Ellul insists that the evangelical image of God's justice is not that of a condemning magistrate but is seen in "the parables of the worker at the eleventh hour, and the lost sheep, and the pearl of great price (he has given all that he has, this God, in order to obtain what was in his eyes the pearl of great price—man; then is he going to break this pearl in pieces in order to throw some away?), and the prodigal son and the unfaithful steward—such is the justice of God. Neither retributive nor distributive. It is the justice of Love itself."<sup>51</sup> Here, then, Ellul seeks to redefine justice in terms of love. Later, however, rather than speaking of "the justice of

47. See, for example, Ellul, *What I Believe*, 191.

48. *Ibid.*, 194.

49. Ellul, *Apocalypse*, 212.

50. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 191.

51. Ellul, *Apocalypse*, 213. Of course, not only does the parable of the pearl not focus on God's justice, it is about human response to the pearl of the kingdom, not as Ellul interprets it here in relation to God's quest for humanity. Given Ellul's later complaint about those who read doctrines of hell from parables that are not about hell, his appeal to parables here to defend his view of God's justice is difficult to defend as consistent.

Love" he will defend universalism with a stark polarised choice: "We have to choose: He is either love or he is justice. He is not both."<sup>52</sup> Although his theology of Christ bearing God's judgment and the nature of divine judgment (discussed below) go some way to addressing these problems, these two contrasting attempts to relate divine justice and love suggest Ellul has not fully answered this problem. Indeed, his earlier work on law, perhaps reflecting his earlier non-universalist theology, presents a different vision of divine justice<sup>53</sup> as does his earlier account of the just deserts suffered by the unrepentant rich.

Third, having rejected a common understanding of divine justice, Ellul attributes it simply to human desires for vengeance,<sup>54</sup> commenting on us "merely satisfying our desire that people we regard as terrible should be punished in the next world"<sup>55</sup> and claiming that "we want people to be damned because there are people we hate and we demand vengeance. It is terribly difficult to accept grace that has no limit because God's love can know no place that is off-limits."<sup>56</sup> As we have seen, this appears to have been part of Ellul's rationale for originally accepting eternal condemnation. However, the fact that it is a flawed reason for accepting the reality of hell is itself a flawed reason for concluding there must therefore be no eternal condemnation as many gladly accept the scandalous truth that God's grace means that the most heinous sinner (Ellul typically, and significantly given his own earlier difficulties, cites Hitler or Stalin) may be saved while rejecting universal salvation.

### *The Comprehensive Reconciling Work of Christ*

Ellul is on much stronger ground in his second main defence of his belief in universal salvation where Barth's influence is particularly evident:

52. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 191.

53. In a study of Ellul's views on law, after tracing Ellul's four phases in his account, ending in a non-judicial reading, I note this final phase follows Ellul becoming a universalist and "though never explicit, the changing view on the nature of God's judgment that this represents and his new emphasis on the triumph of God's grace and love may have contributed to his sharper dichotomy between the form of God's action and that of the human juridical world" (Goddard, *Living the Word*, 259).

54. This is the first element of scandal Ellul notes as he opens his defence of universal salvation in *What I Believe*, 188.

55. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 191.

56. Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*, 60.

the objective, assured salvation and reconciliation of all humanity in and through the incarnation and substitutionary death of Christ.

Ellul's theology revolves around the relationship between God and the world (including humanity) viewed in terms of a dialectic between communion and rupture: creation as communion between God and the world, the Fall as the rupture (Ellul's preferred term for "the Fall") of that communion, the eschaton as the restoration of communion after the rupture of God's judgment and, crucially here, the Incarnation as the restoration of communion in the midst of the fallen world.<sup>57</sup>

His Barthian Christocentrism is clear even when he is not yet a convinced universalist as in his 1946 account of law where he establishes universal human rights (but not universal salvation) by arguing that

In the new covenant in Jesus Christ the judgment is pronounced inexorably and definitively. It is now manifest that man belongs to God, since God ransomed him with the blood of Jesus Christ. In this new covenant the restoration takes place . . . In the new covenant Christ is not only the victim in whose blood the covenant is concluded. He is also the one who concludes the covenant with God in behalf of all men. He is the only man with whom God is well pleased. Through him God views all mankind. This is the miracle of substitution wherein Jesus Christ asserts human rights.<sup>58</sup>

In his first full statement of his universalism, Ellul emphasises that the fundamental human problem is separation from God as the result of human sin. Sin and separation have, however, been wholly overcome by God's action in taking human flesh in Christ:

As concerns sin, which is separation from God and not just the individual acts of wrongdoing that result from this, one might say that it is suppressed in Christ, since in him God and man are identified, there is no more separation, and reconciliation between God and man has been fully made. In terms of the perfect reconciliation made in Christ, all humanity is reconciled to God, or, better, God has reconciled all men to himself. It is God who does the reconciling of the world. Nor is anyone left out . . . The movement is always a unilateral one from God to man. The gulf between the two has been filled in. Separation no longer exists.<sup>59</sup>

57. I have argued for this in detail in Goddard, *Living the Word*, chapter 2.

58. Ellul, *Theological Foundation*, 56–57.

59. Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 79–80.

Ellul is clear that this act does not mean that everyone is a Christian or that all humans live out this reconciliation, but the Incarnation has effected a universal reconciliation that will not be undone. Citing 2 Corinthians 5:19 and Romans 5:11, Ellul insists there is no discrimination here<sup>60</sup> and that the individual human response to this “does not in any way affect God’s decision to reconcile the world to himself.”<sup>61</sup> To return to his language about hell as the absence of God, Ellul argues that in the Incarnation we have God with us and it “amounts to the inalienable assurance that God is henceforth forever with us, on our side, by our side.”<sup>62</sup>

At the heart of this reconciling work is, of course, the cross and it is important that Ellul’s understanding of Christ’s death is not an exemplarist, subjective view of the atonement in which God simply demonstrates his omnipresent and unconquerable love for all which he then accomplishes through universal salvation. A central part of Ellul’s universalism is a much more traditional Reformed, objective atonement theology often expressed as a substitution and in the classic juridical terms of condemnation and satisfaction. This is already evident in the study of 2 Kings where Ellul reflects on the fact that God is not like a human judge who sends people to prison and then goes home—“He accompanies the one he condemns both to prison and to hell. He leaves his peaceful heaven and takes upon himself all that man undergoes.”<sup>63</sup> Later, in *Ethics of Freedom*, Ellul rejects any eternal condemnation on the grounds that all condemnation has fallen on Christ: “It seems to me that the universality of salvation is implied by the fact that the totality of condemnation fell on Christ. Since Christ was God, he did not assume a mere part of our condemnation, or the condemnation of a section of men. The measure of his deity means that he bore the condemnation of all men. Hence there is no condemnation in Christ.”<sup>64</sup>

60. “This is a unilateral act of the God who in an extreme expression of his love decides to reconcile the world as a whole even in all its rebellious, hostile, and autonomous power, saving sinners without discrimination . . . All are sinners, and all as such have been assumed and reconciled to God by Jesus Christ” (Ellul, *What I Believe*, 203–4).

61. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 204.

62. Ellul, *Humiliation*, 56.

63. Ellul, *Politics of God*, 110.

64. Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 82.



He also expresses this in terms of divine judgment, writing in *Apocalypse* of how the judgment of the world and evil has already been carried out on the cross and thus there is not a final judgment that might lead to damnation: “The decision of the ‘supreme judge’ has been taken; there is no novelty, no repetition to be expected. There is no other judgment because the totality of evil has been revealed, exerted against Jesus; and he has borne, accepted, assumed that totality. There cannot be a *more* to this judgment. How could one imagine an addition to the fact that God has judged God, that God has condemned God, that God has taken upon himself the totality of the evil and error of man? What could there be *after*?”<sup>65</sup>

So, in his fullest statement, he is clear that appealing to God’s justice in order to reject universal salvation and demand eternal punishment is unacceptable. Citing John 12:32 he speaks, first in Anselmian terms, of Christ “satisfying divine justice” and then shows his Calvinist heritage when he acknowledges that “all the evil done on earth from Adam’s break with God undoubtedly has to be judged and punished.” However, he insists that Christian teaching about Christ is that “the wrath of God fell entirely on him . . . God directs his justice upon himself; he has taken upon himself the condemnation of our wickedness.”<sup>66</sup> Thus, he argues, there can be no second condemnation without suggesting the judgment of the cross and the price paid there were insufficient. Such a view must be rejected: “there is no other justice of God than that which condemned Jesus Christ in the name of all men”<sup>67</sup> and “this justice is satisfied in God and by God for us.”<sup>68</sup>

Here it is clear that Ellul has, in contrast to some modern defenders of universalism, maintained continuity with his Reformed tradition and can still speak strongly of the wrath of God and his judgment, condemnation and punishment. However, he has followed through its logic to universalist conclusions. As has been recognised by some committed to a non-universalist position within a Reformed theology, the logic of

65. Ellul, *Apocalypse*, 112.

66. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 191. There are here clear echoes of Barth’s account (in CD IV/1) of the judge who is judged in our place and Ellul acknowledges that universal salvation for him originated with Barth and the recognition that “all the suffering and all the punishment has fallen on Jesus Christ alone. Therefore, there is no longer any condemnation beyond him for humankind” (Ellul, “Barth and Us,” 24).

67. Ellul, *Jacques Ellul*, 112.

68. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 191.

penal theories of the atonement drives their adherents either to a form of limited atonement (or particular redemption) in which Christ’s death is not intended for all but only for the elect (presumably where Ellul was in his early double predestination days) or, as here in Ellul, towards universalism.<sup>69</sup>

Finally, Ellul also articulates the significance of Christ’s death in terms of divine abandonment similar to those of Moltmann in *The Crucified God* (see chapter 18). This is crucially important on a number of counts. First, it is another aspect of our alienation as Ellul claims that it is “essential to distinguish between the silence of God and the distance existing between God and man, a distance cancelled in Jesus Christ, and which we are told will be cancelled for all mankind at the time of the return and of the new creation.”<sup>70</sup> Second, he describes the cross and the silence of God using the language of “rupture” not for humanity’s break with God but the separation within the Godhead revealed in the cry of dereliction. Third, and more significantly still, he develops much further what was hinted at in his earlier discussion of Jonah and describes this aspect of the cross with a phrase he regularly cites—attributing it to Barth—in relation to the existence of hell: the “possible impossibility.”<sup>71</sup> The relevant passage is worth quoting at length because, although the focus is on the real possibility of God’s silence and abandonment being experienced within human history, Ellul’s account captures what lies at the heart of his convinced and deeply theological and Christocentric universalism:

But there is this cry. Jesus was not psychologically deluded. God abandoned God. He abandoned himself. He went down into the abyss out of which he had brought the creation. There was a break between Father and Son (*Rupture du Fils et du Père*), and what is more, a splitting apart of God within God—the possible impossibility (*L'impossibilité possible*). From that time on we know the possibility of God’s silence toward us. To say that, since Christ was himself abandoned in that way, no one is similarly abandoned, is quite true. To say that, because God so loved

69. For a recent discussion of this debate which defends limited atonement and argues it as the reason why penal substitution does not entail universalism see Jeffrey, Ovey, & Sach, *Pierced*, 268–78.

70. Ellul, *Hope*, 118–19.

71. The section as a whole is, interestingly, entitled “The Impossible Possibility” (Ellul, *Hope*, 114) which is how he describes God’s silence towards us.

mankind, he abandoned himself, cancelled himself out for man, and therefore no one can any longer get away from that love, is also true . . . This truth means that no one is abandoned as Jesus was abandoned, that is to say, in the ultimate, total, and limitless manner, in the completely inaccessible depth. It means that there never will be any question of a final silence, a final abandonment. The history of mankind (or of a man) never ends on the great pause of an absence of God.<sup>72</sup>

In other words, it is ultimately Ellul's theology of the cross, articulated in a number of highly orthodox forms, which is the reason why he believes "it is not theologically possible that there be damned men."<sup>73</sup>

### *God's Separating and Salvific Judgment*

The third central element in Ellul's theological defence of universalism is the most original and the main insights appear to have come from his study of the book of Revelation.<sup>74</sup> Critics of universal salvation often protest that it fails to do justice to God's judgment, particularly his final judgment. Part of Ellul's response is found in his Christology but also of importance is his account of divine judgment. Although never so systematically expounded, this depends on a number of key distinctions in relation to the, *extent*, *form*, *context*, and *objects* of God's action.

The question of the *extent* of God's judgment has already been discussed in relation to Ellul's study of 2 Kings. There we saw that he draws a sharp distinction between *temporal* and *eternal* judgment. The former relates to God rejecting someone from having a role within his work and mission within history or to God bringing negative temporal consequences (famine, destruction, exile etc) on individuals or nations. The latter relates to God determining a person's eternal destiny. The mistake made by many defenders of hell is to read expressions of wrath and destruction in relation to eternity. This distinction is particularly important in relation to Old Testament texts where, because of his belief that "the idea of survival after death or of a resurrection develops only slowly in Hebrew theological thinking,"<sup>75</sup> Ellul is clear that the

72. Ellul, *Hope*, 121–22.

73. Ellul, *Apocalypse*, 213.

74. See in particular Ellul, *Apocalypse*, chapter 6.

75. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 194. For a good discussion of these issues see, Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*.

language of judgment is to be understood as referring to historic and temporal consequences. Further support for this understanding and way of reading biblical texts could also now be found and applied to the New Testament by means of proposals (developed particularly by George Caird and applied in relation to New Testament eschatology by N. T. Wright) which read apocalyptic “end-of-the-world” language in terms of the significance of historical events so that, for example, much of Jesus’ teaching traditionally understood to refer to hell may refer to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.<sup>76</sup>

Regarding the *form* of judgment, Ellul often makes a claim such as “we must not do what many do and confuse judgment and condemnation, as if every passage that refers to judgment had condemnation in view.”<sup>77</sup> Although Ellul is not always careful to make this distinction himself, it is an important one: the act of judgment may result in a positive outcome of vindication as well as a negative one of condemnation.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, a crucial aspect of judgment according to Ellul is not simply a choice between these two options (much less a decision determined by a weighing in the scales) but a work of separation between what is pleasing to God and so to be preserved and what is displeasing to God and to be destroyed.<sup>79</sup> The important consequence of this understanding is that Ellul is clear that all will come to judgment but it does not necessarily follow from this that any will be condemned.

Although he does not make this further distinction explicit, the judgment/condemnation language combines with the temporal/eternal contrast to create the crucial third (and, for Ellul, empty) category of damnation and the damned—those who, as a result of judgment, are eternally condemned. This distinction explains why he is able to state that, “if many texts speak about condemnation, none of them in either the Old or the New Testament speaks about damnation or the damned.”<sup>80</sup> At times Ellul will still use the language of “hell” but this is for God’s

76. Caird, *Language and Imagery*; Wright, *The New Testament*, chapter 10; and *Jesus*, especially chapter 8.

77. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 194.

78. For a penetrating analysis of the act of judgment, see O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*.

79. This view of judgment is discussed both in Ellul, *Apocalypse*, chapter 6; and in Ellul, *What I Believe*, chapter 15.

80. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 193–94.

temporal condemnations and man's inhumanity to man within history —“In the course of human history there are . . . those who are lost on a way with no exit. But the latter are not lost to the heart of God, nor are they outside the love of God . . . What we suffer here on earth is punishment enough. Hell is on earth, as the Bible itself tells us.”<sup>81</sup>

Accepting these two distinctions means that rather than simply reading biblical language of judgment in terms of an eternal hell, it is necessary to be clear whether the language is that of judgment or more narrowly that of condemnation and, even if it is the latter, then one has to decide whether that is best understood in a purely temporal, this-worldly, historical sense.

Thirdly, Ellul is also emphatic that all biblical discussions of judgment or condemnation need to be read in *context* and that when this is done they are not the final word. The work of judgment and even of condemnation must always be understood as penultimate and directed towards salvation. This is most obviously seen in relation to Christ who bears judgment and condemnation but is then raised for our justification. It is found, however, throughout the biblical witness according to Ellul. So, in his first published book on law's theological foundation, he states that “each time God judges, he also pardons . . . justice known by man in the judgment of God is grace.”<sup>82</sup> Then, in his study of 2 Kings, he is emphatic that God's infinite grace “changes every condemnation into pardon, or rather sets every condemnation within the infinite love of God, who punishes to three generations but who pardons to a thousand generations”<sup>83</sup> and that “when God rejects and condemns, when his strictness seems most absolute, he conjoins it at once with the announcing of his salvation and pardon—the two are indissolubly related. Judgment and grace are affirmed in the same movement.”<sup>84</sup> This is part of the biblical dialectic that Ellul constantly highlights—“It is enough to go through the Old Testament to realize that after the passages of

81. *Ibid.*, 203. See also Ellul, *Jacques Ellul*, 112 (“Man already has more than his share of woes on this earth and God would not add to that. On the contrary he came down to earth to console his children. I believe that men between themselves create their own hell.”).

82. Ellul, *Theological Foundation*, 88.

83. Ellul, *Politics of God*, 56.

84. *Ibid.*, 76.

condemnation and intimidation always come words of promise and blessing!”<sup>85</sup>

Finally, Ellul is clear that to understand God’s judgment and his condemnations we must always carefully distinguish between three possible *objects* of his action: human beings, human works, and the powers. Taking these in reverse order, Ellul’s understanding of the powers is the most complex area as here his work develops both in relation to whether there is any created goodness to the powers (he increasingly sees them as wholly negative) and whether or not they have any existence apart from human dispositions such as faith, hope, and desire (he increasingly tends to derive their existence from human dispositions).<sup>86</sup> The powers are spiritual forces—such as Mammon/money, the city, Technique, the state—which are something beyond humans and their works but which are at work in human history and expressed in human works.

Especially in *Meaning of the City* and his study of the book of Revelation, but throughout his writing, Ellul focuses God’s negative, condemning, damning judgment on the powers. So, in one of his later writings, he admits there are words of condemnation in Scripture but says they are quite sparse and “addressed much more often to the *powers* of alienation, error, hallucination, religion, falsehood, and accusation than they are to people.”<sup>87</sup> This is particularly the message of Revelation where “it is the devil, the beast (power), and the false prophet (falsehood) that are thrown into the lake of fire, not beings, let alone human beings, but the forces that from creation have turned people aside from God and introduced absolute evil. It is these rebellious spiritual forces that are in hell.”<sup>88</sup> For Ellul, the final judgment is God’s separation of humans (and their works) from these destructive powers. Because the powers enslave humanity, that judgment—though it may be painful due to human devotion to the powers—will be liberating not damning. So, in contrast to his description of judgment in his earlier study of money, Ellul now clearly distinguishes the powers from the person and views even God’s condemning judgment as a positive and liberating message of hope, revealing the love of God: “Money is damned rather than the

85. Ellul, *Jacques Ellul*, 112.

86. For this see the work of Marva Dawn, especially her unpublished thesis, *The Concept*, summarised in “The Biblical Concept.”

87. Ellul, *Humiliation*, 59.

88. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 205.

rich person; more precisely, the rich person is condemned because of his money and not in himself. Political power is damned rather than the person who exercises it; more precisely, the person is also condemned because of his power over others, but not in himself. People are *judged*; that is, stripped of these powers of evil, but not damned. Thus the words of condemnation when correctly understood are words of liberation for everyone. They are words of hope which certify the love of God.”<sup>89</sup>

Ellul’s positive eschatological vision is also one which includes human *works* as well as all humanity. He holds that human works in history—even though done in rebellion against God—will be redeemed by him and have a place in the new creation, which is not a return to the garden but a new Jerusalem, a heavenly city, despite the city’s origins in Cain’s rebellion.<sup>90</sup> At times Ellul implies this redemption is also universal—“I am convinced that all the works of humankind will be reintegrated in the work of God”<sup>91</sup>—but elsewhere human works are subjected to the discriminating, separating and purging work of God’s judgment.

It is in relation to that purging aspect of God’s judgment that Ellul makes clear the distinction between the judgment on human works and the judgment on human beings, showing how he relates a condemning final judgment to universal salvation. He offers what he acknowledges is a fragile hypothesis based on Paul’s account of God’s judgment on the church in 1 Corinthians 3:10–15 in which he extends this imagery to a person’s life works as a whole to argue that people build their life with a range of materials and that the final judgment “consists of passing the work of this life through fire”<sup>92</sup> with the varying results Paul describes. However, according to 1 Corinthians 3:15, the person themselves will be saved in all cases so, even when what the person did in life vanishes, that work is not the whole person. The person himself or herself is not destroyed or damned. They suffer the vision of what becomes of their life’s work and may face the punishment of nothing of that remaining—

89. Ellul, *Humiliation*, 59.

90. Ellul, *What I Believe*, chapter 16 on “Recapitulation” is the best short introduction to this aspect of Ellul’s theology which is central to Ellul, *Meaning*, especially chapters 5 and 6.

91. Ellul, *Perspectives*, 104.

92. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 211.

“the bitter realization that one has lived totally in vain”<sup>93</sup>—although Ellul doubts any life is so totally corrupt and evil that nothing survives and prefers to see a separation effected by the sword of divine judgment.

Ellul’s vision of final judgment and the distinction between the judgment on the powers (summed up as “the devil”), works, and on human beings is clearly summed up in the following passage:

Human beings to whom God has given life and whom he loves do not go into nothingness or hell, but their wicked and diabolical works do, sharing the same fate as their father the devil . . . We do not merely see the works of our lives burn up. We first have to undergo this separation between our being and our evil works. The reward will be to learn that some of our works are pleasing to God. This is my hypothesis regarding the relation between universal salvation and those works of people’s lives that are condemned by God and destroyed. What is destroyed is not God’s creation but a construction of our own.<sup>94</sup>

### Ellul’s Universalism: Some Questions

Although some critical comments have been made in the course of expounding Ellul’s pilgrimage and defence, this chapter’s limited scope prevents a full evaluation of Ellul’s universalism. In conclusion, however, a number of areas need to be noted as worthy of further exploration in relation to the place of universalism in relation to Ellul’s thought as a whole.

*First*, Ellul’s handling of Scripture. In relation to his doctrine of Scripture, Ellul holds to a basically Barthian position and his work as a whole gives a central place to biblical exegesis and theology, often emphasising the dialectical nature of biblical revelation and the need to hold together seemingly contradictory truths witnessed to in Scripture. At times he applies this to his universalism, acknowledging “all the texts that can be advanced to ‘prove’ the existence of the damnation of certain men”<sup>95</sup> and writing of the need to “better understand the biblical texts which seemed to say the opposite and to let ourselves be challenged by

93. *Ibid.*, 212.

94. *Ibid.*, 213.

95. Ellul, *Apocalypse*, 275, n.15.



them.”<sup>96</sup> His fullest defence opens with the recognition that “the most serious objection to the thesis is posed by the biblical texts themselves”<sup>97</sup> and he begins his discussion of the biblical texts admitting “we have to take into account the fact that many biblical texts refer to hell, to eternal fire, to judgment, to the closing of the gates, to rejection, etc.”<sup>98</sup> later adding that “it is incontestable that many passages speak as though God’s consignment of some people to eternal condemnation and hell were revealed teaching.”<sup>99</sup> Although, as outlined above, he offers some ways round these challenges and provides challenging re-readings of some texts, ultimately he does not live with what he acknowledges are “contradictory statements . . . We find teaching about eternal rejection. We also find references to universal salvation.”<sup>100</sup>

The difficulty here is not only that which Gill identifies when he states that Ellul “has to wrestle with a vast number of biblical texts and make them say the opposite of what they appear to say . . . a major problem on the exegetical level.”<sup>101</sup> There is a deeper methodological inconsistency which Clendenin highlights in his assessment: “Ellul presents his readers with a selective reading of the biblical texts. He dissolves the obvious tension in Scripture . . . This is quite atypical of Ellul, too, for . . . in most cases he is eager to preserve these dialectical tensions in Scripture . . . When it comes to universalism, though, Ellul does not do justice to the large body of biblical texts which present the particularistic view of salvation.”<sup>102</sup>

*Second*, the status and certainty of Ellul’s universalism. One of Ellul’s favourite sayings, attributed to Barth, is that “You have to be crazy to teach universal salvation but you are impious if you do not believe in it.”<sup>103</sup> He is clear in introducing his fullest defence that “I am speaking about *belief* in universal salvation. This is for me a matter of faith. I am not making a dogma or a principle of it. I can say only what I believe,

96. Ellul, “Karl Barth and Us”, 24.

97. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 188.

98. *Ibid.*, 193.

99. *Ibid.*, 195.

100. *Ibid.*, 196.

101. Gill, *The Word of God*, 176.

102. Clendenin, *Theological Method*, 138–39.

103. Ellul, *Jacques Ellul*, 112.

not pretending to teach it doctrinally as the truth”<sup>104</sup> and he often makes similar statements when presenting his case,<sup>105</sup> sometimes linking it to the difficulty of offering biblical justification.<sup>106</sup> As a result Bromiley concluded that “perhaps in the long run Ellul does not differ here very much from Barth’s belief that all people are in fact justified by God but the possibility still remains—even to all eternity—that some will deny this truth and live as though they were not.”<sup>107</sup>

At other times, however, Ellul is far from cautious, asserting that “my own belief is that the Bible proclaims a universal salvation which God in grace grants to all of us,”<sup>108</sup> and when asked by Clendenin whether it would be fair to call his belief in universal salvation a pious hope but not an absolute conviction he is emphatic in his response: “No, it’s an absolute conviction.”<sup>109</sup>

Although Ellul increasingly went beyond Bromiley’s more cautious reading of his view, he clearly wished to retain a place for God’s sovereign freedom and what he regularly referred to, from Barth, as the “possible impossibility” of hell and damnation. So, asked specifically about this by Troude-Chastenet, Ellul laughs and admits that, “It is clear that since God is free to do what he wants he could always make Hell exist. I cannot judge before the event. But I do find this hard to imagine of a God of Love.”<sup>110</sup>

*Third*, and perhaps related to this, is the fact that Ellul nowhere explores in any detail *how* all will ultimately come to be saved. Although, as

104. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 188–89.

105. For example, “Even though I could hardly teach it as a dogmatic truth” (Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 82).

106. “For me, obviously, there are biblical texts which seem to go against the idea of universalism, but I really don’t understand them very well. That’s why I say very often that for me universal salvation is in the realm of faith, but I cannot present it as a dogma” (Anonymous, “Freedom”).

107. Bromiley, “Barth’s Influence,” 40.

108. Ellul, *Anarchy*, 4.

109. Anonymous, “Freedom.” So also Ellul, *In Season*, 58 (“I am now convinced that there is universal salvation”), 78 (“I have come to this certainty of universal salvation”), 202 (“I have the firm conviction that salvation is universal”) and Ellul, *Perspectives*, 104 (“I am convinced . . . that each one of us, no matter how sinful, will ultimately be saved”).

110. Ellul, *Jacques Ellul*, 112. He also notes Rev 20:15 as a solemn warning of this possible impossibility that “God always reserves to himself the possibility of rejecting people, and this is the secret of his freedom” (Ellul, *What I Believe*, 206).

noted above, there is a distinction between judgment of our life-work(s) and judgment of our persons, there is nothing about human agency and response to God's judgment, no exploration (as in other defenders of universalism) of any post-mortem process of purging or wooing of those who die unbelieving and impenitent. His earlier understanding was clearly that "with death, the situation that people want becomes definitive" but once he rejected that view he did not articulate—perhaps because it could only be speculation—the subjective side of being saved eternally and objectively.

*Fourth*, and following on from this, the lack of interest in the human subject and human freedom is a further major lacuna in Ellul's discussion of universalism. The second great lesson he claimed to have learned from Barth related to freedom which is a central feature of his own work and yet at no point does Ellul really grapple with how universal salvation relates to human freedom. In beginning to articulate his universalism in *Ethics of Freedom*, he does so in the context of making clear that the objective liberation of humanity in Christ is not automatically expressed in human freedom in history but he does not explain how it automatically secures human salvation in eternity.<sup>111</sup>

This highlights a major tension within his thought especially in the light of his insistence that God is a God who eschews power to enforce his will, who respects the "independence of the individual in relation to God . . . who does not condition him either directly or indirectly."<sup>112</sup> How, in the light of this vision, can he say that "this reconciliation . . . will apply to them (*s'impose à lui*) whether they know it or not, whether they will it or not" unless the God of the *eschaton* is quite different from the God revealed in human history?<sup>113</sup>

*Fifth*, a common critique of universalism is the impact it has on Christian mission and evangelism. Here, although not elaborated, Ellul's work opens up important questions for our post-Christendom context. He is clear that there is still a place for evangelism but it is not an appeal to gain salvation through acknowledging sin, repentance, and faith. In fact, Ellul is clear, again following Barth, that "it is only when people learn that they are loved, forgiven, and saved—it is only then that they

111. See Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 76–83.

112. Ellul, *Politics of God*, 33.

113. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 204.

learn they were sinners . . . It is by learning I am saved that I learn the importance of my sin.”<sup>114</sup>

Perhaps reflecting his critique of our means-dominated society, Ellul is insistent that the church is not offering the world a means to the end of salvation, a technique for “getting saved.” It is proclaiming—bearing witness to—a “done deal.” So, he recalls a story of Barth’s that “everyone has received a sealed letter from God, but a Christian is the one who has opened it and read it. That’s the way it is in reality. Every person is loved by God, but Christians are the only ones who know it.”<sup>115</sup> With clear hints that his rejection of hell is perhaps also linked to his embrace of non-violence, Ellul asks himself if all are saved “is it worth the trouble to proclaim Jesus Christ and to talk of him?” then graphically and provocatively contrasts the form of the gospel message according to universalists and non-universalists: “I answer yes without hesitation, for when I encounter individuals in total despair, crushed by misfortune, by the lack of a future, by injustice or loneliness, I must transmit to them the reason I myself have found to hope and to live. In other words, the message is no longer ‘Be converted, or I will kill you’ but rather ‘You want to kill yourself; be converted to escape from killing yourself.’”<sup>116</sup>

As Darrell Fasching in particular has highlighted,<sup>117</sup> there are important questions to explore here as to the ways in which Ellul’s commitment to universalism is related to this missional emphasis not on conversion but on discipleship, bringing hope and resisting the powers and also to his opposition to a Christendom ethic and embracing of a distinctive, non-violent, anarchistic Christian ethic. Although “Ellul himself has said that one need not accept his universalism along with the main body of his approach to ethics,”<sup>118</sup> the connections between (a) holding that people must believe to be part of the church to be saved, (b) the context and structure of the world of Christendom, and (c) the forms of a distinctive Christian social ethic and missional practice merit further reflection both in relation to Ellul’s own thought and more widely.

114. Ellul, *Perspectives*, 104.

115. Anonymous, “Freedom.”

116. Ellul, *In Season*, 76.

117. See Fasching, “The Ethical Importance.”

118. Unpublished interview with David Gill (July 1982) cited in Morris, “The Importance of Eschatology.”

## Conclusion

Although not generally ranked as a major theologian, Ellul's biblical and theological studies have had influence, especially in North America. Ironically, he has been particularly well-known and influential in Reformed and evangelical circles where his distinctive and increasingly prominent commitment to universal salvation would normally be viewed as at best highly problematic if not worthy of anathema. This study has sought to show that, although not without significant problems both in relation to the rest of his thought and in its own right, there are important lessons to learn both from the journey which led to Ellul's conversion from double predestination to universalism and from the justifications he then offered for universal salvation in ways that sought to engage with Scripture and to respect Reformed and evangelical theology even while fundamentally challenging its eschatology.<sup>119</sup>

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119. I am grateful to Gregory Wagenfuhr for sharing some of his own thinking on Ellul's universalism and for pointing me to a number of sources.

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