

## **Heroes of the Faith: Jacques Ellul**

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**Romans 12:1-2**

**1John 4:4-6**

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There are a whole group of heroes who are known by two main words – crazy and prophetic. During their lifetimes most people think they are crazy, out of their minds, weird, strange and all the rest. Later people say they were prophetic, visionary, far-sighted, maybe even not-of-this-world.

The people who said owning slaves was wrong when all their neighbors had slaves. Everyone had slaves. You can't run a plantation without them. You are crazy. But they stuck with their beliefs and lived by them even though all the pressure was on for them to conform to the "real world."

The Old Testament prophet Amos said they were about to be destroyed as a nation because they oppressed the poor and disregarded God. You're crazy the people thought. It was a high time in Israel's history with wealth, an economic boom in the land of milk and honey and peace with their neighbors, no war. At the time they thought Amos was crazy, later it turned out he was right. Prophetic!

That's the challenge for prophetic heroes; they only become heroes when history proves them right. Then we look back and think "wow, the courage and determination it takes to hold on to what you believe when all around you is such powerful pressure to conform, give in, go with the majority, get along."

Because each one of us feels and knows that pressure to conform and be accepted, part of the group, we rightfully look up to the courageous souls who found the strength within them to be non-conformists, prophets in their time.

Our hero for today is such a man. Most of us have probably never heard of Jacques Ellul. I knew him only as one of many authors we had to read in seminary. But one member of our worship team made such an impassioned speech to include Ellul in our hero series that the rest of us said okay, in part to find out more about him.

He was born in France in 1912. His father worked in the wine making business of Bordeaux and his mother was an art teacher. The depression hit the family very hard

and Jacques was well acquainted with poverty. The Depression had a life long impact on him.

Thankfully with his brilliant mind he was able to finish high school, and then go on to college and law school.

His mother was a Christian and his father was an atheist and very anti-Christian and anti-church. His mother made a promise to his father that she would not influence the children toward Christianity and she said nothing about Jesus overtly. However she did read her Bible every day and pray silently to herself.

At age twenty-two Jacques was reading the Bible, the letter to the Romans, chapter eight, when he had some kind of powerful experience of God which he refused to ever describe. He would only say that he was “converted with a certain brutality” and “saw a perspective beyond history.” He told his mother he had been converted to Christianity, to which she replied “I am not surprised. I have been praying for that every night since you were born.” Never underestimate a praying Christian mother.

Ellul became a professor of sociology, political science and economics in the School of Law and definitely did not fit in with the Nazi wave that affected all of Europe. His father was killed in 1942 at the hands of the Nazis. Jacques and his wife Yvette escaped to the “free zone” in the French countryside where he fought in the French Resistance movement, assisting Jewish people and others to escape the German forces.

After the war he went back to teaching and writing, writing prolifically at least thirty-two books that have been translated into English and no less than seven biographies in English about him.

So what made him a hero, in addition to his participation in the French Resistance Movement? He was a prophet, a consistent voice against the mindless majority. He wanted Christians, all those following Jesus to be subversive in this world against the principalities and powers that be. Two scriptures give us the best guidance to learn from Jacques Ellul and be challenged by his prophetic thought, since what prophets seem to do best is challenge the status quo.

The first scripture is his favorite passage, Romans 12:1-2.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Romans 12:1** *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.<sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

I would sum up his reflection and life's work on this passage with a single word:  
THINK!

Don't just follow the majority. Don't just conform to the world. Don't just mindlessly go through your life falling in line behind the crowd. Don't be conformed to the world. Be transformed in the renewing of your mind. Discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Ellul's big word of challenge was propaganda. He warned in a prophetic voice that the media, the cinema, the voices of the world are intentionally manipulating us to think certain ways, feel certain ways, and behave certain ways. As I read him I can feel the bucket of cold water thrown in my face. Wake up people! Listen to what they are saying with a critical Christian ear.

Be aware that all forms of media are in business. They are selling us themselves and their advertisers. Don't believe everything you read or hear or see. Even more than that develop an AWARENESS of what they are trying to manipulate us toward.

That word AWARENESS was big for Ellul because Christians are called to think, to be transformed in the renewal of our minds, to refuse to be conformed to the world. Our standards, our way of thinking is to be along the will of God, the ways of God, not the ways of the world.

You have probably heard about the frog in the kettle. Apparently if you attempt to put a frog into a boiling pot of water it will immediately leap away to safety. But if you put a frog in a kettle of room temperature water on low, low heat, it will swim around happily until gradually it is boiled alive. It was unaware of when the water went from safe to dangerous.

Prophets warn the same can happen to us as gradually, gradually, gradually we are manipulated by the powers that be to think like them, feel like them, act like them. Wake up! Be aware! Think, think, think!

The second scripture passage that gives us Ellul's second prophetic challenge is I John 4:4-6.

*<sup>NRS</sup> 1 John 4:4 Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. <sup>5</sup> They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. <sup>6</sup> We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.*

From this and similar passages in the New Testament comes the principle to be in the world but not of the world.

We are of course in the world. We are born into the world. We live in the world. We breathe the air. We drink the water. The creation story tells us that God took dirt, earth, and made a human being. Like a clay sculptor God fashioned a man and then breathed into him the breath of life. We are connected to the earth from which we came.

And we are of our time in history in the world. We are greatly affected by our culture. The world is in our hearts, our minds, our souls, our daily lives.

Now there is a great temptation to separate ourselves, to not be in the world. Because the world is, in many ways a scary place, it is tempting to create a bubble and live in it. To wake up in a house with a security system and then get in a car with surround air bags, insulated from harm. Leave a gated community only as necessary and then get back in behind the gate.

This is an understandable temptation in a scary world with crime and fearful realities. But as we have all heard at some time "Evil prevails when good men do nothing."

Jacques Ellul like all prophetic voices before him encourages us to engage, to get involved, to in one word ACT. Precisely because there is evil in the world, because there is a cosmic battle between good and evil, light and darkness, and the people of God are people of the light who must struggle against the darkness.

This is part of what makes someone a hero, or heroic. They get involved; they make a difference on the side of good, on the side of God. Here are two Jacques Ellul quotes. "The meaning of being a Christian is not working at your own little salvation, but changing human history." And "There are moments when history is flexible, and that is when we must put ourselves inside to move the works."

To be in, but not of the world! To be engaged in the world, to care about the world but not let the principalities and powers of this world, the corrupting forces of darkness into our souls.

How do we do that? In our little corner of the world, how do we change history, how do we work at salvation on the bigger scale than just our own? One way the prophets point to is by fighting poverty.

Everyone involved in Habitat for Humanity is doing that. Eliminating poverty housing from the earth, that's the mission of Habitat. Providing affordable housing that breaks the cycle of substandard living. Those who go on Thursdays and Saturdays to hammer and drill and build, those who coordinate schedules and provide lunch for the

workers, those who write a check and mark it “Habitat” are all engaged in the world on the side of life, goodness, light, God.

Some of you volunteer with at risk kids in the school system. Some of you work in afterschool centers with kids from the most poverty stricken areas of Brevard County only about eight miles from where we are right now. The thing Jacques Ellul did he was most proud of wasn't fighting the Nazis with the Resistance or writing lots and lots of books, or being a great professor teacher, it was his twenty years of work with at risk kids for juvenile delinquency. He was engaged in the battle for their souls, not to give in to the destructive ways of darkness, but to come over to the side of goodness and life.

I find the prophets very challenging, for me personally. I think that is the role God calls them to fill. To challenge us, to move us out of our complacency, our unconsciousness and wake us up, shake us up. There is a battle, a struggle going on in this world in which we live and good people are supposed to do something

To be aware! To THINK! Not get sucked into the propaganda messages trying to manipulate us into thinking and feeling and behaving the way the powers of this world want us to. And to engage, to do something, to ACT in some way to some degree in the real world that needs us that needs God that needs light and life and the power of the Holy Spirit.

THINK and ACT.