

Hope in Time of Abandonment

By Jacques Ellul

Wipf & Stock, 2012

Introduction by David W. Gill www.davidwgill.org

Jacques Ellul commented more than once that *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (the original French title was, literally, "Forgotten Hope") was his own favorite of all the fifty or so books he wrote. It is certainly one of his most striking and passionate works. Many of his favorite themes about the character of our dysfunctional technological society and our mediocre Christian church are echoed here. The argument is often achingly personal in its feel. It often comes across as extremely pessimistic on first reading, but it repays a second and third reading by delivering what it promises: a renewed, robust hope in spite of everything.

It is from St. Paul that we get the famous "theological virtues" of faith, hope, and love. In the introduction to his *Ethics of Freedom* (ET 1976) Jacques Ellul says that it is these three virtues that provide a "mediation" of the relationship to Christ which is the foundation of ethics. *Hope in Time of Abandonment* and *Living Faith* are critically important starting points for the ethics that Ellul will later articulate in the *Ethics of Freedom* and the *Ethics of Holiness* (manuscript completed but not yet published in either French or English). As difficult as this news may be for readers of *Hope* --- you don't get the full picture until you move through the volumes on the ethics of freedom! (Ellul never wrote the planned volumes on the virtue of love or its corresponding ethics of relationship).

A lack of hope is not just an issue in personal life and social relationships. The magnitude of the global problems of hunger and disease, of violent political conflict and terrorism, and of environmental degradation are truly depressing if we take a serious look at our world. How can we ever overcome these problems in any significant way? Encounters with our educational system, business marketplace, news media, and popular culture can be equally depressing. The mediocrity of much of our Christian witness and presence in the face of these great challenges seems further cause for hopelessness.

It might be even worse than all of this! In *Hope in Time of Abandonment* Jacques Ellul suggests that our age is like that time feared by the prophets when God turns away from the world: an "age of abandonment." God is not dead, Ellul argues, but he is silent. Ellul is not saying that individuals can not experience God today but that God seems silent and absent from the broader culture and its institutions. The world is experiencing the silence of God because of its refusal of his Word and its preference for the idols of the age.

Jacques Ellul writes in *Hope in Time of Abandonment* that both his sociological studies and his personal trials led him toward despair (echoes of Kierkegaard here as in much of his work). One of his most interesting discussions is on our contemporary "age of suspicion" of which Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are the primary progenitors (pp. 48-54). But precisely at his lowest point, when there seemed no exit, no help, nothing to cling to, that is when true hope was born, Ellul writes. Until we get to the end of our illusory hopes we cannot discover the authentic hope which is found in waiting (wakeful, persistent expectation), prayer (wrestling, demanding that God speak again), and realism (the antithesis of idealism). Ellul gives here his brilliant analogy of the ocean (with its surface waves, its deep stillness, and its intermediate currents) as a way of calling for a focus on understanding the reality of the main currents in our society while avoiding distraction by the surface, transitory current events and not getting lost in the depths of metaphysics and philosophy (pp. 279 – 82).

Hope works in at least two ways for Ellul. First, hope *liberates*. It *relativizes* this world and history because we know that absolute justice and peace can only occur with God's gracious intervention at the end of history. This realization liberates us in the present from idolatrous, perfectionist, utopian schemes and from the absolutizing of positions, parties, nations or ideologies. Perfection comes only at the End. Thus, we can avoid taking ourselves or our projects *too* seriously.

Ellul makes the point here (to be developed at length in the *Ethics of Freedom*) that authentic hope leads to an ethics of freedom. "Freedom is the ethical expression of the person who hopes. Hope is the relation with God of the person liberated by God." (p. 239). Hope frees us in the present by binding us to the End. "Freedom is created by God for man and in man. If hope is the response of man to God's love and grace, freedom is the response of God to man's hope, giving man the possibility of living out hope concretely and effectively in daily life. . . There is thus a strict reciprocity between hope and freedom. God loves, man hopes, and God makes free."(*The Ethics of Freedom* (ET 1976), p. 13).

Second, hope *motivates* our ethical behavior. "Hope . . . brings with it . . . the relativizing of all things *and* a total seriousness applied to the relative. . . . The absolute of God does indeed relativize everything but God's Word tells us to take absolutely seriously this relative, which he himself took seriously enough to give us his Son." (*Hope*, p. 242). Thus, while Christian hope relativizes the present, far from producing apathy, it motivates and gives absolute seriousness to that relative. It is a future hope which guides our present, particular action. We are not called upon to purge, reform and manage the world as a whole. We are called to find ways of acting as faithful "signs" of God's promised future. It is this eschatological orientation which made Jesus' life so singular and unique; it is this ethic of hope which alone will render Christian presence distinctive as true salt and light in our earth.

For Ellul, hope is more of an existential stance toward God and toward life than it is a virtue of character in the usual sense. A more traditional Aristotelian or Thomistic approach would encourage us to cultivate a habit, a disposition and inclination, of hopefulness. God's sanctifying work of the Spirit on our lives and our repeated, conscious acts of authentic hope would work together to re-shape our character in hopefulness. Ellul, as the philosophical and theological son of Kierkegaard and Barth, sees hope not as a habit or ongoing disposition so much as a choice in the present. But it is the decisive choice for it leads to freedom.