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Ellul's "On Freedom, Love, and Power" - Book Review

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Jacques Ellul. *On Freedom, Love, and Power*. Compiled, edited and translated by Willem H. Vanderburg. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2010. xxi + 247 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 9781442644201.

Reviewed by Ken Badley, Education, George Fox University

Besides lecturing at the University of Bordeaux, Jacques Ellul opened his own home for seekers of many backgrounds to explore their questions about Scripture, faith, power, and the relation of the kingdom of God to the social and political order. Among those at Ellul's dining room table was Willem Vanderburg, who, being blind, sought Ellul's permission to tape-record Ellul's answers and talks. That was 1974. From transcriptions of those tapes and with the full support of Ellul's family, Vanderburg has assembled an excellent and frustrating collection of Ellul's work for those whose needs, in Vanderburg's words, are not met by church. Whether their needs are met by church or not, both the Ellul faithful and those who have never read him before will thank Vanderburg for his labor.

Vanderburg introduces the work of Ellul in general and this particular compilation with a readable and inviting essay ("Introduction," vii-xxi). We hear Vanderburg's voice quite clearly in this introduction, but always in conversation with Ellul and not at all intrusively. The reader new to Ellul will benefit from Vanderburg's introduction as much as the long-time reader will want to read his justification for including what he has and for summarizing an entire book of Ellul's in the last section of the volume.

Following his introduction, Vanderburg includes four of Ellul's treatments of specific biblical passages, each with a brief introduction by Vanderburg. He starts with Ellul's treatment of Genesis 1-3, "Freedom from Morality and Religion," which takes up nearly 100 pages (1-98). Following the explorations in Genesis, Vanderburg includes about forty-five pages on Job 32-42, "The Love That Seeks Us Out" (99-145). The third major section includes Ellul's commentary on several parables from Matthew's gospel and a short note about a few non-parabolic references in Matthew to the kingdom of heaven (147-210). Long-time readers of Ellul will recognize Vanderburg's title for this section as one that goes to the heart of Ellul's overall project: "The Culmination of Judaism—The Kingdom of Love." Part Four, "It Was All There in the Beginning," consists of a brief treatment of the first two verses of John's gospel. Vanderburg ends the book ("Epilogue: History and Reconciliation," 219-233) with his own summary of Ellul's *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation* (New York: Seabury, 1977).

My earlier use of the words excellent and frustrating was not incidental. *On Freedom, Love, and Power* is of a piece with the whole of Ellul's work. The excellence and the frustration grow from the same Ellulian inclinations and habits. For example, he does not hesitate to note that the purpose of the Genesis accounts was not to provide a day-to-day record of creation events. In the same section, he notes the immense difficulties of translating the creation accounts, and that a doctrine of creation was of little interest to those who compiled the first books of the Bible. Ellul labels as "nonsense" the works produced by those who like to predict the world's future in detail based on their (mis)reading of the book of Revelation (230). But the highminded pleasure some of us might take when Ellul's readings of Scripture frustrate those far to our theological right will be short-lived. This because he repeatedly reminds us all that the world's systems and the world's understanding of power run as an inverse of the kingdom of God. If those of us who work in the academy are honest, we will admit that Ellul's critique of power applies to us as well as it does those who enjoy military or corporate power. And we will admit that while the gods we chase may have nothing to

do with a seven-day creation at the beginning of time or a literal thousand-year reign at the end, we nevertheless construct gods to chase.

Having begun reading Ellul forty years ago, I should no longer be surprised at the confidence with which he disposes of longstanding problems with the incarnation on one page and handles difficulties with the trinity a few pages later. Neither should I lose sleep over his explanation of how the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven—the theme of his section on Matthew—relate to each other, or how both relate to the kingdoms of this world. In his defence, Ellul engages in conversation so easily with so many partners, including the likes of John Calvin, G. K. Chesterton, Karl Marx, Faust and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, that he has perhaps earned the right to expound Scripture and criticize society in one breath with the confidence he does. Ellul shows the highest respect for Karl Barth but at one point he suggests that Barth misunderstood a Scriptural passage because of the particular German translation he used. In my reading, Ellul's confidence never seems unwarranted, always matter-of-fact. But where long-time Ellul readers may take comfort or at least mutter something to the effect that "this is just Ellul," readers new to Ellul may find in him a confidence that breeds resistance in themselves.

When Ellul examines several parables in Matthew in his attempt to understand the kingdom of heaven, he emphasizes repeatedly that the heavenly kingdom operates by a logic very different from "the one by which people and communities normally operate and live" (175). To illustrate, the parable of the debtors (Mt. 18:23-25) shows that in God's economy, mercy trumps justice; the king forgave the debt rather than simply granting the request for more time to repay it. As Ellul unpacks this parable, an even stronger message emerges. Ellul writes that "within the kingdom of heaven, justice and law represent the greatest injustice and, in a relative sense, evil itself" (177). We should recall that Ellul taught law at Bourdeaux and believed that a system of law was necessary for society to function. But he clearly envisions no Faculty of Law in heaven.

In the summary of Ellul's *Apocalypse* with which he ends *On Freedom, Love and Power*, Vanderburg blends Ellul's voice with his own to create a highly readable treatment of the last book of the Bible. Vanderburg deserves commendation for abbreviating Ellul's commentary while retaining his prophetic core. We find references to church denominations (221), the tension between market productivity and the carrying capacity of the world (223), the choice that humanity must finally make between Babylon and the Lamb (226), and even the charge that—even in the church—we will some day discover that we "have lived much of our lives in vain" (229) because we aligned ourselves with the powers to such a degree. Bold words indeed, but not at all out of character for Ellul. Vanderburg's success in this Epilogue is to pass along to his readers Ellul's tonal qualities, for the most part without missing a note. Vanderburg noted in his introduction that his summary of Ellul's study would be "brief and inadequate" (ix). For me at least, the Epilogue was adequate to ignite a desire to re-read Ellul; for that reason, I will grant Vanderburg the word brief in his description but I want to deny him the word inadequate from his description of his own writing.

Without hesitation or qualification, I recommend this book. Those familiar with Ellul will recognize his way of mapping the territory. Those who have not read Ellul before who read Vanderburg's compilation will warm to Ellul's challenging readings of the central passages addressed in these talks as well as to Vanderburg's précis of Ellul's commentary on the book of Revelation. Vanderburg has truly offered a service to Ellul readers and to all of us with his translation and compilation of *On Freedom, Love, and Power*.