

Top Paper**The City's Curse, The Church's Plight:
Technology, Communication, and the Sacred****An Ellulian Perspective**Stephanie Bennett¹

If Ellul's "mythic" meaning of the city is an accurate depiction of the frailty and fallenness of humanity and the enduring inability to untangle oneself from the structural evil therein, is it any wonder that the church follows its lead? With the programs, methods, committees, agendas, distractions, and pace that are entrenched in city life setting the pace for the contemporary church, is it surprising to see the lack of vitality and purposeful community among the people of faith? Is it an anomaly that the church resembles a distracted, disengaged city rather than the hopeful, connected, and enlivened community of faith? To be more explicit, form and structure have increasingly begun to set the pace for spiritual formation in the church. Focus on methods, efficiency, numbers, and expansion in the church have somehow eclipsed the greater goals of servanthood and service to the needy. Rather than a focus on traditional goals such as spiritual formation, a transformed life, and wholeness, the means and methods of evangelism have taken the lead position in the church—not just in appearance, but in practice. Viewed from the perspective of Jacques Ellul's *la technique*, this essay explores the relationship between the traditional form and structure of the church and its ability to function organically.

“THE CITY is cursed,” wrote French theologian and social theorist Jacques Ellul (1912–1994). This is a strange statement, no doubt, but one that stands center stage in Ellulian thought. For Ellul, the city is symbolic of all that is amiss in the world, from the looming evils of war, organized crime, prostitution, economic injustice, and violence of every ilk, to the mundaneness of traffic snarls, interpersonal disputes, greed, and just plain old human boredom. According to Ellul (1970), there is really no chance to change the problems associated with the city because it is not evil in its particular location or extremities. No—the city, as an entity, is cursed (pp. 47–49). Ellul's apparent gloom, however, has “to do with something more basic than the city (itself, *sic*) or its merely terrestrial smog, muggings and police strikes” (Cox, 1971, p. 353). In his paradigm, the corruption begins with man's distinctive step outside of fellowship with God in the Garden; thus, we see the city's connection to “the Church.”² In the pages that follow, we will take a deeper look at Ellul's thesis concerning “the city” and attempt to uncover the ways in which its alleged curse can lead to something more than hopelessness for

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² Throughout this essay, “the Church” will be used when referring to the abstract, and “the church” will be used to refer to Christians meeting in specific locales.

human beings. With a desire to advance dialogue concerning its application to the intersection of the sacred and the nearly ubiquitous technological lifestyle of 21st-century Western society, let us then explore Ellul's meaning of "the city."

The Meaning of the City

THE MYTHIC meaning of the city is found as an undercurrent in several of Ellul's main works and is most prominent in *The Meaning of the City* (1970). In this work, Ellul posits the city as a symbol of humanity's determination to build security outside of the divine order. It is the symbolic locus of "man's work" and desire to find meaning in life that is separate, or divorced, from God (p. 62). Some (viz., Cox, 1971) have suggested that this book is more of a radical Bible study than a work of theology, while others (viz., Christians, 2006) maintain its important place as a counterpoint to Ellul's social theory. Still others consider Ellul's use of biblical narrative and mythic meaning of the city as a means by which the French scholar provides analysis and insight into the human predicament in general.³ Throughout this volume, and his entire corpus, for Ellul "the city" represents the "most vivid and compelling symbol of man's stubborn pride and rebellious disorder" (1970, p. 353).

Much akin to his concept of *la technique* (which, in short, may be understood as the innate human fascination with, and capitulation to, methods and programs, particularly in the unrelenting drive to apprehend the most efficient means), Ellul lodges a complaint with the machinations of the city, pointing to the reality (or force) that is deeper than the human will to overcome. "Like technology, the city is for Ellul a metaphysical reality, caught in the grip of a self-propelling autonomy. It is not subject to human direction" (Cox, 1971, p. 353). To many, this way of thought represents a hard technological determinism; however, Ellul does not insist that individuals lose volition in the grip of technology, but invariably find themselves in submission to the city's built-in constraints.

The First City and the Tower of Babel

ELLUL (1970) cites the inception of the first city mentioned in the Bible, the city of Enoch. This city was built by a murderer—Cain—who took his brother's life out of anger and jealousy. Rather than repenting for his vile act, Cain launched out to make his way in the world, searching for redemption outside the purview of his Maker. In using this event as a starting point, Ellul does not take issue with particular aspects of urban life or use the "sins" of specific cities as a text. Rather, he insists that "what is wrong with the city is universal and essential" (Cox, 1971, p. 351). It is the underlying powers to blame—man, foisting himself out to conquer nature with Promethean hubris—that corrode the landscape of the city.

After Enoch, Ellul cites the Tower of Babel and continues to note the ensuing drive to build "a city with human hands," in the further construction of Nimrod, Nineveh, and Jerusalem. Using this biblical narrative as a metaphor, he postulates the enslavement of humanity to method, program, and human technique—something similar to a wave of tidal force, one beyond the human ability to control. This he refers to as "the powers" (pp. 45–62).

³ Here, *myth* is understood as a "value-laden story that communicates fundamental aspects of the society producing the myth" (Clark, 1981, p. 276).

La Technique and Sin in the City

ONE of Ellul's primary theses regarding the loss of human freedom in the city involves his concept of *la technique*. This loss of freedom does not so much represent the individual acts of violence that are magnified with increasing population in urban areas, as it represents the strong and persuasive discourse that co-opts human decision-making. This impingement of volition occurs slowly, over time, and stems from the "structured evil that disfigures all of human life" (Christians, p. 121). *La technique* manifests itself through the various machinations of man endeavoring to find solutions for the human condition outside of Divine order. It is a fascination and focus on the methods, means, and techniques used by human beings to survive without drawing from the wisdom and help offered by the Creator. What this absence of Divine order and influence produces is the loss of purpose and a life of vacuous existence that resembles mere survival instead of the flourishing that was intended in the Garden. Yet, to look to an unseen Maker for help without capitulating to human authority is a challenge. It involves waiting for direction and the collective wisdom of a gathered assembly.

The conundrum this tension produces sets the pace for a downward slope toward greater human control and the resulting domination of others. Without a concept of God and the direct reliance on his involvement, human beings rely on human solutions; in this age, these are manifest not only in techniques, methods, and means, but in all things technological. One might quite accurately call it the technological panacea. What may be most disconcerting about this dilemma is that, according to Ellul, once the forces of the city take root they become entrenched and are beyond changing by human beings with good will. Christians posits Ellul's thesis as "inescapable," contending that to the "degree that the technicized dominates, healthy livelihood disappears" (2006; p. 127). When viewed in relation to human freedom, both within the church and outside its walls, a clear position becomes evident in Ellulian thought. That is, what may appear to be more freeing to the human soul because of factors such as convenience, comfort, efficiency and routine, may actually be in opposition to freedom.

Without God's involvement in the human situation or in the Church, the goals of life disappear "in the busyness of perfecting methods." They are lost in a self-propelling force that Ellul terms, *la technique* (1951, 1989; p 64). *La technique's* force is nurtured because the "magnitude of the very means [is, *sic*] at our disposal", abusing the tremendous symbolic power we are given, allowing us to "live in a civilization without ends" (Christians, 2006 p. 127). This loss of *telos* manifests itself slowly as the city expands and human beings rely increasingly on the means by which social reality is constructed. Whether it is buildings and streets, websites or church programs, "the city" seeps into the foundation of all that is constructed by human ingenuity, creating a foundation that is riddled with cracks. It is important to note that Ellul does not condemn the city, but reports on its condition from a symbolic perspective, using the biblical narrative as ground for analysis (pp. 67–68). Efficiency, in itself, is not the problem. Rather, it is the dominating, self-propelling effect that insinuates itself throughout all aspects of life, exchanging greater, teleological goals for the means used to attain them.

Communication Breakdown

ONE present example of this usurpation of *telos* may be found in the current use of the cell phone. Use of this device is becoming ubiquitous.⁴ While the cell phone does much to connect people at great distances and is both convenient and quite efficient, as a solution to the problem of separation it carries with it an unforeseen consequence that may actually work against the goal of effective communication. Sound bytes and dropped calls take the place of an actual discussion; quick, rapid-fire words and text are substituted for face-to-face dialogue. One must question whether the use of these mobile devices advances the goals of interpersonal communication, or is actually wearing away at the importance of meaningful conversation? The world may be becoming smaller but is it succumbing to an increasing sparseness in relationship and communication?

Additionally, the stress, heightened pace, and added responsibilities associated with carrying a cell phone have led some to refer to the device as an “electronic leash”.⁵ The sense of enslavement to the device experienced by many avid users may be seen one small example of *la technique* at work in manifesting the city’s curse.

In explicating Ellul’s paradigm, Ellulian scholar Clifford Christians (2006) explains that not only is *la technique* at work in modern society and may be most clearly seen in the symbolism of the city, but that the force of technological innovation may be part of the reason for the seemingly downward slope of communication competence. While blogs, discussion lists, websites, media outlets on the web and online forums have created numerous new ways for information to be disseminated and the voice of the people to be heard, the underlying goals are not necessarily being reached. Although these more sophisticated means of communication are being used to connect people at greater distances and outside the limits of space and time, use and dependence

⁴ In the United States, with 81% of cell phone users reporting that their cell phone is always on, and cell phone sales topping \$207 million, thus introducing a great deal more into the public square. This intense proliferation has already begun to nurture an “always on” mentality, one that advances something one might call a “24/7 social environment.” The blinking, buzzing, multi-tasking cacophony that ensues also serves to situate the average mobile media user in a position as to always be ready to receive information (often from multiple sources simultaneously). Always connected, yet are people conversing less? Is communication behavior more effective or less?

⁵ Recent statistics generated from workplace surveys and studies funded by the Pew Internet Research Group’s Center for Media Research are similar to other studies reported from the past 10 years. Although no direct causal relation can be drawn, the numbers seem to point to a growing pressure to participate in the mobile communication technology revolution and may suggest there is a growing need for detachment from the device, particularly so that quiet, rest, rejuvenating silence and interpersonal richness may flourish. The following statistics are taken from the Center for Media Research on April 25, 2006 http://www.centerformediaresearch.com/cfmr_brief.cfm?fnl=060425. The numbers reflect studies of Americans’ use of the cell phone:

- 1) 81% of cell-only users say the device is always on.
- 2) 82% of Americans say they are irritated at least occasionally by loud and annoying cell users who conduct their calls in public places.
- 3) 22% of cell owners say they are not always truthful about exactly where they are when they are on the phone.
- 4) 39% of cell users ages 18-29 are not always honest about where they say they are.
- 5) 24% of cell-using adults report they often feel like they have to answer their cell phones even when it interrupts a meeting or a meal.
- 6) 22% believe that “too many” people try to get in touch with them because others know they have a cell phone.

on these media seem to have propagated more efficient and creative ways to be barbaric.⁶ Rather than becoming a more civil society, the opportunities for communication breakdown have increased and there are now more ways to insult one's neighbor than ever before.⁷

Drawing a comparison between the externalities of city life as opposed to the more communal—relational—life of smaller communities, Christians describes the action of *la technique* in society as entirely in accord Ellul's conceptualization of the city. If this is so, several questions beg to be asked: What exactly is the correlate of Ellul's "curse of the city" in terms of interpersonal communication, new media, and the church as community of faith? And, what sort of response might be called for in light of the world's growing population and ensuing need to live in the city? To begin an answer to these questions it is important to understand the ways in which disparity between the organic, natural human functioning and a mechanistic existence is treated in Ellul's thought.

Loss of Personhood

THE foundational problematic for Ellul is that the city is the place where individuals lose their uniqueness and the particularity of a lived life. The city is symbolic of the way in which the spark of creativity becomes diminished and people are dehumanized rather than most fully able to walk in their potential. Perhaps this may be interpreted as the way people learn to tolerate the warp and woe of a hectic, mediated, fast-paced life instead of rising to explore and experience all that life can be if attended to in freedom. Christians describes the curse of the city as a condensation of human evil where "Ellul is talking neither about individual sin nor simple collective responsibility. [Rather, *sic*] he explicitly disavows both possibilities" (2006, p. 121). Instead, individuals are "engulfed by the sin of the city (Ellul, 1970, p. 67) which "draws men into a sin which is hardly personal to them" (Christians, 2006, p. 121). From the neglect of a neighbor because one does not know they are suffering to the outright evil of stealing a neighbor's goods—whether by omission or deliberate, the sins associated with city life easily become abstractions rather than individual insults or injuries.

Essentially, then, the abstraction and denouement of the individual in the city environment becomes a building block for the usurpation of the person as subject. In the city, people become objects. Is this determined, a fact that defies the will of the individual? Certainly not; however, the environment and its morality serve as structuring features of city life, influencing the way people function within the city's walls and relate to one another, either ethically or otherwise. The underlying philosophy of life lived in the city takes on a cast that reflects the city's necessity. That is, as the hand of man increases in power, people are increasingly viewed and treated as the roles, functions, and labels they carry rather than unique individuals they are. The curse upon the city makes it a place where "flesh-and-blood people become consumer, worker, market, taxpayer—a person in the abstract" (p. 128). As David Gill explains, "Many have thought of technology as a "value free" phenomenon. A means. Ellul showed that it has become a sacred "end" the *telos* of our society, embedded with values" (2007, p. 4).

⁶ Do blogs actually create a more expansive public square? Is the public sphere more lively and interactive because of the proliferation of online venues? Does television really serve to connect the masses and provide an underlying ethos for public discourse or are the corporate and entertainment biases therein corrupting the social landscape?

⁷ Note the myriad studies on flaming, cyberpunk, cyber bullying, identity theft, and the hate sites that have proliferated on the World Wide Web.

The Principle of Utility

WHAT both Ellul and Christians dub as the “city’s curse” is subsumed in a worldview that places a high premium on instrumentality and empirical knowledge. It is this self-same drive toward efficiency—not technology itself—that catalogs and organizes all social functions in terms of how useful they are in the structuring and controlling of organic life processes. In fact, it is this utilitarian view of life that is the ground upon which *la technique* thrives.

Linked to this notion is an idea that has become a commonplace of the West—that external or material objects create the “good life.” This is a philosophical problematic that the city promises (at least in theory) but rarely delivers. Yet, for the masses, the unspoken hope remains—life in the city promises better homes, leisure, escape from solitude and boredom, better work, schools, and access to medicine and doctors, among other necessities of modern life (Ellul, 1970, p. 60). These comforts are not to be despised, and Ellul is not demeaning them by recognizing the propensity for people to place their hope in the city. Rather, it is again a matter of misplaced hope in the solutions that human beings can provide rather than living by divine order and trusting God for sustenance in all things.

Certainly, the majority of the people living in cities are not aware of the curse upon “the city,” at least not formally. If they are, it is present in the foggy boredom and sense of hopelessness that entraps the average person in the work-a-day world of maneuvering through traffic and monotonous repetition. In fact, if confronted with this disparaging and depressing picture, many might recoil from the very idea city’s inherent curse, viewing it with shrugging obsequiousness or merely as “the way things are.” To think otherwise may only lead to despair or the inability to function within it. In fact, many will balk at the prospect of the “city’s curse.” The entire concept of a location being flawed and outside the scope of human remediation seems implausible. Common sense would say to utilize the conveniences and technologies of the city so that the pressures of life might ease. And why not? What is the purpose of refraining? Why walk the five blocks to meet someone when a telephone seems to accomplish the goal just as well, even more efficiently? To do otherwise often seems pointless. The answers to these questions are part of the built-in sway of the city. This, according to Ellul (1970), conflates with the fact that city dwellers have an innate understanding that the city does not cure social ills but often contributes to them. The tension is essentially dialectical.

The Mindset of Efficiency

ALONG with the generally impersonal nature of life in the city, there is the matter of the principle of utility at work in deeper levels, affecting and changing the collective mindset of a society. In an article analyzing the parallel of Ellul’s theological and sociological paradigms, Christians (1998) describes the city as the place of desacrilization—a place that fosters the loss of “the sacredness of life” (pp. 3–7). Rather than lauding life as sacred, human freedoms are exploited in the city, and the fresh water of freedom often ends up clogged in the pipes of bureaucracy and washed away in the gutters of busy streets. In the city, the principle of utility and efficiency becomes sacrosanct, overtaking the more important ends of well-being, strength of community, and human flourishing in general. Ellul puts it aptly: “In this terrible dance of means which has been unleashed no one knows where we are going and the aim of life

has been forgotten [. . .] Man has set out at tremendous speed—to go nowhere.”⁸ This desacralization may be most apparent in “the city,” but, contends Ellul, it permeates the state and human existence at large. It is an outgrowth of *la technique* at work in the midst of the city. Overpowered by the sway of *la technique*, human beings are “correctly tailored to enter into an artificial paradise” (Christians, 2006, p. 128). This artificiality is played out to the extreme, not just in the failings and foibles of life in the city but in its entrenched violence, traffic, and false expectations of intimacy.⁹

To explicate this acquiescence to *la technique* one must look more deeply into the way an environment helps to structure thought and behavior. It is not as though the city (as an entity) orders the steps of man, usurping human will, *per se*. Rather, it is as if the very way the city (in all its bureaucratic necessity) structures and shapes behavior that complies with its underlying principle of utility. In its reliance on technology and methods, whatever its latest instantiation, this shaping (or *influence*) propagates more of the same until all human action is eclipsed in technical necessity. Ellul’s notion of the influence of technology recognizes that certain benefits may be derived by individuals and cultures that promote use and adaptation to them, but his perspective primarily suggests that the costs of this rapid adaptation may far outweigh the benefits. These undulating adaptations and uses come together to saturate the city in a sea of technique.

In attempting to show the spiritual dearth of an existence on earth void of God, Ellul elucidates an intuitive knowledge recognized by city-dwellers, one and all. This includes a sense or *intuitive knowing* that the city is not especially the best place to raise one’s children or the ideal place to find rest and relaxation. For, in spite of “the engineer’s bright eye, the urbanist’s broad sweep of knowledge, the hygienist’s idealism...look at the results,” wrote Ellul (p. 62). There is “even more slavery—which recreation can only make more tolerable” (p. 161). Again, for inhabitants of the city, there may be little cognizance of this slavery, for the illusion of liberty is strong, particularly as the pace set by the drive for efficiency demands complete attention.¹⁰ Living in a city where one is raised within the context of the limitations and bondages that the city inheres, there may be a tugging at one’s heart for “more,” but that tug is often easily ignored with the large supply of technological gadgetry and solutions to help distract and amuse.¹¹

The Clamor of the City vs. the Centrality of Divine Care

ELLUL’S (1972) use of the biblical narrative in his discussion of the curse of the city continues in another of his works, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, where a number of other examples of this dialectic are in operation throughout his biblical voyage.

⁸ Jacques Ellul (1951, 1989). *The presence of the kingdom*, pp. 63-69.

⁹ Living in closer proximity to one another inheres a sense of safety and close-knittedness that has become increasingly illusional as post-industrial western society has advanced. Rather than safety and a sense of community, advance city life seems to be increasingly isolating (for a proper explication of this trend, see Anderson, Cessna, and Arnett, *The Reach of Dialogue*, 1994 and Bellah, et. al 1985).

¹⁰ Ellul’s arguments concerning automation and the illusion of liberty are scattered throughout his works, but may be found most specifically in *The Technological Society*, 1964. In similar fashion, using television as his text to decry the culture of entertainment, Neil Postman wrote a book about the nature of these distractions called *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. A 20th anniversary edition of this now classic volume was published in 2005.

¹¹ In their explication of the sociology of knowledge, Berger and Luckmann (1966) described this well: The theoretical formulations of reality, whether they be scientific or philosophical, do not exhaust what is “real” for the members of a society. Since this is so, the sociology of knowledge must first of all concern itself with what people “know” as “reality” in their everyday, non- or pre-theoretical lives. In other words, common sense “knowledge” rather than “ideas” must be the central focus for the sociology of knowledge. (p.15)

Using narratives from both Jewish history and the writings of the New Testament to make his argument, he points to the story of Naaman in the second book of Kings. There, depicting God as one who is not abstract or theoretical but a Creator who acts and moves within the unique course of human lives, the reader is reminded of the dialectical complexity between the importance of the individual commitment to follow God's guidance and the well-being of the assembled believers, or God's People. Consistently, Ellul points to the necessity of going beyond the gifts and resourcefulness of humanity to seek guidance and help from a transcendent God. The engagement with "his people" is one that Ellul posited as the Creator's highest goal and the true locus of power and authority for the people of Israel. This engagement, however, does not contest the inescapable condition of humanity constrained within the bonds of the city, for God's desire for fellowship does not negate human volition. The profundity of "free will" as a gift from God, juxtaposed to the call of God to seek, trust, and depend upon Him for direction and wisdom in their lives is perceived by Ellul as being the correct interpretation. His analysis of the following military dilemma between Naaman and Elisha helps clarify this point:

At every point the general [Naaman] has a decision to make. At every point this decision is not confronted by an irresistible constraint or by crushing evidence and certitude. He has to listen to what the little slave says. But why should he obey it? And even when the king of Israel sends him to Syria to Elisha, why should he not take umbrage and return to Syria to provoke the diplomatic incident? In addition, the word Elisha speaks to him is certainly not a compelling or totalitarian word. He can refuse to listen to it, and this is exactly why Elisha does not appear, why he treats him thus. This kind of anonymity that does not break through the television screen nor stun the middle-class citizen is God's great respect for the liberty of the one he loves. Naaman, too, has to decide for himself. [. . .] At every point in the story, then, each decides for himself what he has to do, and at every twist Naaman is confronted by a simple word which it is just as easy to set aside or ignore. This whole nexus finally serves to express the full gospel (p. 34).

The need to apprehend a "full gospel" is not only the way Ellul contests the problems associated with the city's curse, but also the view he takes toward advancing the principles of life among the people of God—i.e., functioning within the church. As clear in his interpretation of the encounter between Naaman and Elisha, Ellul advanced a broad interaction and participation of both the *individual* and the *people* in Naaman's healing. One interpretation is that the power and apprehension of God's gifts and purposes are best seen as they flow through the many rather than through a centralized king or single prophet. Another implication is the endowed power of individual choice. Although later the reader discovers that God's healing word came through Elisha, the fact that the prophet did not even receive this Assyrian general face-to-face, but sent a message of healing through his humble servant, is telling. Here again we see Ellul's insistence upon the centrality of divine care rather than the action or positions of man being the locus of power.

The City and the Church

NO matter the locale, generation, or type of church government, the drive for rank, certainty, and power is far from absent among the people of God. In spite of the intentions of an individual laying hold of it, the apprehension of power often devolves into domina-

tion. According to Ellul, examples of this in society and in the church occur again and again. Yet, the set of human values that desires centralized power among the people of God has been antithetical to God's own promise of leadership among His people. An example drawn from the history of ancient Israel explicates this in a discussion of the reign of Solomon in the Old Testament. Ellul writes:

Solomon was just and upright. But then power went to his head, as it did with others. He imposed crushing taxes, built ruinous palaces, and took 700 wives and 300 concubines! He began to worship other gods besides the God of Israel. He built fortresses over the whole land. When he died he was hated by everyone (1988; p. 49).

This underlying thread and obfuscation of power occurs whether or not the king wielding it is deemed "good" or not, eventually becoming anathema to the primary message of God's intervention in human history, which, consistently has been one of love, mercy, restoration, and wholeness.¹²

The human drive for power and resulting domination is clearly a large part of Ellul's meaning of the city's curse as well as its outworking in what it means to participate "in the city." As he sees it, the underlying root of the curse is this very seeking after a promethean-type power that controls nature. Rather than looking to God as the sustainer and giver of Life, people seek centralized human power—something tangible; human beings seem to need a fixed locus of strength and safety where control may be gained and the future predicted. Exploring Ellul's work the reader comes across it again and again. Here, in an explication of the story of Israel's longing for human Kingship during the era of the prophets, he explains the struggle between God and the nation of Israel, a people called out to follow Him:

[...but] God does not want this form of [human] government, for it will introduce confusion between Yahweh and his "incarnation" in the king. God objects, but Israel insists, demanding this reasonable advance. So God warns his people. We are given an extraordinary description of what centralized political power inevitably means: more taxes, military conscription, arbitrary police, the impossibility of limiting power. This is the price the people will have to pay to have efficient political power and to reach the level of progress of other nations (p.18).

What does it take to rid the city of its curse? To function outside of the constraints and structures of "the city" requires the willingness and dedication of the people of God to seek His face and wait on Him, rather than conform to the organizational structures and precepts of government based on man. This might be impossible within society, but what about in the Church? Waiting is not terribly efficient way of getting thing done. Neither is making decisions collectively within the assembly a way to be productive. Avoiding centralized power is not an easy task for Israel, nor for the contemporary Church. Israel's God is not visible; He does not sit on an earthly throne governing them as other peoples are governed. So it is in the Church. The desire to have clear

¹² Mark 12: 29-31 reads: "The first of all commandments is: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these."

directives, quick answers, immediate results and progress, in general, is more tenable within the practice of strong, earthly leadership, but how often does the city's curse seep into the organizational structures of the Church? To explore this idea further is an exciting and worthy venture but requires much deeper review of Ellul's other theological works.¹³

Escape from the City

DESIRES to escape from the pressures (or curse) of the city have been the impetus for many social and ecclesiastic movements, individual ventures, and human attitudes throughout the entirety of history. From Plato's just society and Thomas More's vision of Utopia to the Marxist dream of a common society and the "back to nature" movement of the hippie generation in the 1960s, the longing for an ideal world free from the snares of city life has never been far from the human imagination. In today's media-saturated society, rumblings of a new, ideal world have been associated with cyberspace for the last two decades, particularly as the interactive applications of Web 2.0 begin to take stronger hold. Freedom from the bondage, limitations, and harrows of city life has been much lauded in virtual communities such as *Second Life*. Social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *MySpace.com* allow individuals to interact with "others" while escaping the hazards and risks of interaction in their geographically anchored neighborhoods and streets. Some have perceived these technologies as useful opportunities for the church, particularly in the ability to eliminate the social barriers caused by distance and time. This perception has often promoted hope that the church is entering a new age of enlightenment—a release from the constraints and curse of the city. The logic is that if the space upon which we relate, do business, and find recreation is virtual, the actual ground of "the city" can be avoided. It would seem that the dirt, violence, and underlying sickness of the city cannot touch us. But, is this a true solution?

While much reality *is* socially constructed in cyberspace, and a new age of long-distance "friendships" may now be conceived as being made possible by human ingenuity and skill, cyberspace is yet marked with the city's curse. Despite freedom from the city's actual grit and grime, the simulations and untethered experiences associated with the social networking taking place in the virtual sphere does little to release the person behind the screen from his or her own entrenchment in the city. Like any utopia, cyberspace is "no place."¹⁴ The city's curse follows city dwellers right into the ethereal environments of cyberspace. It is "a world" of conceptual reality built with images and text—a symbolic universe that allows distant relations to stay intact but simultaneously exploits the importance of being fully present with another. Its highly mediated platform is underscored by its illusory and evanescent qualities, each of which foments the development of opportunities for presenting fictionalized (or idealized) versions of oneself. True, relationships seem much more flexible, less stressful, less "city-like," but because its construction exists within the human imagination cyberspace remains laced and tainted with all the accoutrements of the city.

¹³ Among the works to review, the following are of particular significance: Ellul, J. (1981). *In Season Out of Season*. Lani K. Niles (trans) Harper and Row; San Francisco; Ellul, J. (1986). *The Subversion of Christianity*. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (trans.) Eerdmans Publishing; Grand Rapids; Ellul, J. (1988) *Anarchy and Christianity*. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (trans.) Eerdmans Publishing; Grand Rapids.

¹⁴ The word "utopia" literally means "no place." The derivative is from two Greek words, "ou" meaning "no" and "topos" meaning "place." Literally, then, Utopia means "no place" or place of nowhere.

Perhaps the main premise Ellul advances in his explication of the city is that whether in the church or the wider community, this problem of “the curse” exists and cannot be resolved by simply living better. Technology cannot heal it. New media cannot bring the needed help. Greater interactivity and convergence are not the panacea. There is no technological solution. The problem of the city’s curse cannot find resolution by the enactment of laws or enforcing a code of ethics. Neither can the problem be assuaged by better management or the outright destruction of the cities. What, then, does this dilemma mean for modern society? What does this drive for centralized power mean, particularly as it applies to the practical matters of the church? How is human power limited when “city life” begins to manifest itself in the church? Is there a way of escape? The book of Hebrews in the New Testament may provide a telling link:

Jesus also suffered and died outside the city’s gate in order that He might purify and consecrate the people through the shedding of His own blood, and set them apart as holy—for God. Let us go forth, from all that would prevent us, to Him outside the camp...For here we have no permanent city, but we are looking for the one which is to come.¹⁵

When read in Ellulian light, the above New Testament passage might seem to imply that distancing one’s self from the pollution and worldliness of the city is part of identifying with Jesus. Contrary to the seeming logic in this position, Ellul would counter this interpretation with a resounding “no!” Because this is a spiritual battle involving powers that are beyond the reach of human hands, the tension between the city and the Kingdom of God will exist until the end of time. Thus, God’s people are called to be “in the world, but not of it.” Here again, the reader is brought to the symbolic meaning of the city. However, it would still seem as though answers to these quandaries for the People of God lie in identification with Jesus, and that is outside the city gates.

Escape from the city necessitates something more radical than immersing oneself in virtual reality or packing one’s bags and exiting to the countryside, for the city...is within us. The city’s curse is not something one can easily flee. It must be addressed from the inside, out. The need for reflection, rest, and time off from the 24/7 pace of this present world is surely a step toward solution, but it will not be enough to stay the menacing tide of methods, programs, and menu-driven lives.

The Church’s Plight?

IF Ellul’s “mythic” meaning of the city is an accurate depiction of the frailty and fallenness of humanity and the enduring inability to untangle oneself from the structural evil therein, is it any wonder that as the church follows its lead? With the programs, methods, committees, and agendas that have become well-established practices of contemporary church life, the distractions and pace of “the city” does not only seep into the worship experiences of the local church but saturates the collective soul of the People of God, establishing an already entrenched mindset that creates a false perception of the Church’s role in society and in the life of individual believers. As the city sets the pace for the contemporary church, it is not surprising to see the lack of vitality and purposeful community among the people of faith. It is no anomaly that the church often resembles a distracted, disengaged organization or club rather than the hopeful,

¹⁵ Hebrews 13:12-14.

connected, and enlivened community of faith. As form and structure have increasingly set the pace for spiritual formation in the Church, the focus on methods, efficiency, numbers, and expansion have somehow eclipsed the greater goals of servanthood and service to the needy. The simple goals of “loving thy neighbor” and sharing life together in the Body of Christ are often lost in the immediacy of programs, committees, sermons and methods to improve efficiency. Rather than a focus on traditional goals such as spiritual formation, a transformed life, wholeness, the means and methods of evangelism have taken the lead position in the Church, not just in appearance, but in practice. “This is why we are not first asked to preach and convert Babylon, but to pray” (1970 p. 75).

Certainly, not every particular church has fallen into the grip of slavery to the city, just as every *particular* city is not overtaken with the control of its grip. But, if the organizational design and forms established as normative in the city continue to set the pace and standard for life in the Church, is it any wonder that a backlash more closely resembling the corruption, snarls, and snares associated with the city’s curse will overtake the flourishing and fruitfulness of a verdant and life-producing fellowship with God in the Garden?

Reflection is perhaps more necessary than chastisement.

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