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Chapter 11

My Conversion to Christian Pacifism: Reading Jacques Ellul in War-Ravaged Central America

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“Good Guys and Bad Guys”

GROWING UP IN THE 1960s, my favorite television shows were “Combat” and westerns. Along with a steady stream of cowboy and Indian movies I watched many Second World War movies. All of these programs clearly distinguished “the good guys” from “the bad guys.” These films facilitated my viewing issues, causes, and nations in a simplistic way. As I looked at the world and read history I saw countries and movements neatly separated in two categories, “good guys” and “bad guys.”

The same television that displayed John Wayne triumphing over the Japanese brought me the news from Southeast Asia. The former influenced the way I thought about the latter. Just as John Wayne always played the “good guy,” I assumed the US and those who fought with us were the “good guys.” Just as John Wayne always won, I expected the US to win. As a grade-schooler I had little grasp of the issues behind the fighting. I knew that the communists were the “bad guys.” I assumed that the same was true in Viet Nam as I had been taught about other wars, the US had to fight to protect democracy and freedom.

The Vietnam War did not offer the fronts and invasions of the wars I saw on TV movies. Looking at a map did not give me a sense of who was winning. Hence, body counts acted as my gauge of the war's progress. The evening news would show a little chart that separated the "good guys" and the "bad guys" into two columns and listed the number of casualties. We almost always "won" this war of numbers. In my young mind it seemed just a matter of time before the other side would run out of soldiers and lose.

Things did not happen as I envisioned it. A war that was going on when I started grade school continued to grind on as I moved into junior high. I did not understand why we did not win. It confused me that we did not just go over there and bomb them until they gave up. By the time US troops left Vietnam, I, like most, was glad to not have to see it on the news every night. In 1975 South Vietnam fell, and I graduated from high school. I left for college still unaware of the complexity of the issues surrounding the war I had grown up with. The Vietnam War had only forced me to recognize that "good guys" do not always win.

I want to make a parenthetical observation here about TV. I watched a lot of TV as a child, including a lot of war movies, westerns, and other violent programs. It did not, however, turn me into a murderer, or a violent person. So one could use me as an example to say TV is not so bad, or so powerful. But the reality is that TV was a very powerful shaping influence in my life. It helped form my world view, a world view that neatly distinguished between right and wrong, and put me and my country firmly on the good side of that line of distinction. Television fostered within me a belief in the myth of redemptive violence. It portrayed violent force as a tool, either a tool for good or for evil. The difference was the goal. Good people used force for noble goals. Thus TV contributed to me having an "ends justify the means" approach to life. Television helped me come to closely link my country, patriotism and my faith.

My Neatly Categorized View of the World Crumbles

In college my clear-cut way of dividing causes into categories of good and bad moderated. Through history courses I came to see that the same event can be interpreted in different ways, and that a nation can have a variety of motivations in foreign and domestic policy. Even so, when I graduated and moved to Honduras in 1979 I basically continued to evaluate things from a black and white, "good guys and bad guys" perspective.

I did not go to Central America for political reasons. I had the choice of teaching social studies at a mission school in Honduras or one in Peru. After four years of Midwest flatness, I opted for the mountains of Honduras over a flat jungle in Peru. I probably did not even know who Anastasio Somoza was. Central American politics, however, quickly became a major topic in my life. Somoza was the military dictator of Nicaragua. His family had come to power with US assistance and had maintained power for decades with US support.

I arrived in Honduras in August, 1979. The Sandinista revolution had triumphed over Somoza in neighboring Nicaragua just the month before. Although concerned about the Sandinista's Marxist tendencies, like many, I saw Somoza as the "bad guy." His corrupt dictatorship clearly went against the ideals of freedom and democracy I had grown up with. In 1979 in Central America my world view with neat and clearly defined categories remained.

El Salvador, however, presented a less clear picture. As time went on the situation became harder for me to understand. The guerrillas were openly Marxists. From my perspective that made them the "bad guys," but the army and the Salvadoran government were hard to embrace as the "good guys." Their anti-communist stance and US backing would normally make them the side I would support, but stories of murdered civilians, priests, and nuns confused the issue. Therefore, in 1982 I eagerly accepted the invitation to visit a Salvadoran refugee camp in Honduras. I hoped that talking to Salvadorans would help me more clearly understand which side was right in El Salvador.

As I helped the refugees construct more permanent shelter I asked them why they had fled El Salvador. Every person I asked said they fled because of the army. Many told me how soldiers had killed their neighbors, including the elderly, women, and children. Others explained how the army had invaded a town on the other side of a hill from their own. Some sadly recounted that even though their family escaped from the army's attack of their village they had lost children or relatives by drowning or from machine guns shot from helicopters as they attempted to cross the river in to Honduras. Whether they had firsthand experience or were fleeing so that they would not, all feared the army. I had expected people to have different opinions on which side they supported in the war. I planned on sorting through the various opinions to put together my own conclusion. No sorting was needed. They all said basically the same thing. I did not talk to

anyone who tried to persuade me that the guerrillas were the “good guys,” but they all indicated that the army was their problem.

My simple view of the world, and its neat categories, exploded on an August Saturday afternoon in that dusty refugee camp. I asked a middle-aged woman, as I had others, why she had fled. She replied, “The army killed my seventeen-year-old son.” I did not press for details, but she continued talking. As tears ran down her face, she told me how the soldiers had dragged him from the house, cut off his hands and feet and shot him through the head. Voices argued within me. The logical orderly world view of my youth led me to think: “there must have been a reason they did that.” Scrambling for some way to understand I found myself saying, “Perhaps they thought your son was a guerrilla.” She replied, “I have never seen a guerrilla, they never came into our village.” Suddenly, war, which had made so much sense when John Wayne did the fighting, became disgusting, destructive, and tragic. I had written a paper on the “just war theory” while in college, but emotionally I became a pacifist in that refugee camp.

In a college class I had heard a panel of four people present their views on whether Christians should participate in the military. One of the presenters was Howard Claassen, a physics professor and one of two Anabaptist faculty at the college. We had to write a paper in response and I argued for just war theory. I did not write with a lot of conviction, but I also did not write with a lot of doubt. It was the position that made sense with the world I had grown up in—a world where flags were in the churches I attended, where Christian friends and relatives served in the armed forces, and television shaped my world view.

In truth I really did not have a Christian position on war and violence. In churches I grew up in we did not even engage the issue. I don’t recall ever talking about it in Sunday school or youth group. Like the rest of the country we just followed our leaders in to one military action after another without ever discussing whether the actions fulfilled the requirements of the just war theory we supposedly embraced. If, rather than just hearing a lecture and writing one paper, I had been a part of discussions about the just war theory, then perhaps on that August afternoon I would have responded differently. In my anger and horror I might have said, “This killing of unarmed non-combatants is not just. This is therefore not a just war and Christians must refuse to participate and protest the injustices our tax money is supporting.” Just war theory, however, was not in my thoughts that day.

While living in Honduras I had met a number of Mennonites. It was actually through friendship with a Mennonite Central Committee worker that I went to the refugee camp. I knew their position on pacifism and non-resistance, and I became more aware than I had in college that there was a very strong biblical case for pacifism. But in a certain sense it remained fairly academic until that hot sunny afternoon in the refugee camp.

I had seen the evil fruits of war in the faces of these people and I did not like it. In my gut I had converted to pacifism. Intellectually, however, I was confused. Pragmatically, pacifism did not make sense, how can you expect a nation to not have an army and not use force? My visit convinced me that the Salvadoran government and army certainly were not the “good guys,” but what about the guerrillas? Besides my deep-seated negative feelings about communism, I was also a student of history and economics. I knew that what the revolution offered, more economic equality in El Salvador, was certainly needed; yet I also knew that historically communists had not produced what they espouse. So, even though my disgust with the army made me want to support the guerrillas, I could not. I did not see them as the “good guys” either.

I returned to my home in Tegucigalpa with these questions churning in my mind. A later trip to El Salvador itself, when I actually walked through villages that had been attacked and burned, would only confirm my thoughts. In a sense the trip to the refugee camp cleared up the picture for me. It did not, however, allow me to analyze the situation in the simple and clear way I had wanted. When people asked me what I thought of El Salvador I found myself saying: “Both sides are wrong, the violence is wrong, it is a mess.” This answer bothered me. I felt the need to say: “This side is right and we should support them.” My position felt like a cop-out.

Reading Ellul’s Thoughts on Violence

Soon after this trip to the refugee camp, while looking at the bookshelf of a missionary from whom I borrowed books, the title *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective* jumped out at me. I noticed that the author was Jacques Ellul. Another missionary friend, Bob Ekblad, had enthusiastically recommended Ellul to me. I had looked at the Ellul books Bob had and borrowed and read the one that appeared the lightest reading, *Prayer and Modern Man*. Now, however, Bob’s recommendation of the author, and my pressing questions, made the book on violence the choice that day.

I expected a book, like others I had seen, that picked one position, pacifism, or just war theory, and selected Bible verses that supported its position and ignored or explained away passages against its position. Ellul's book, however, surprised me. It differed from any I had seen on the topic. He did not exactly fit into either of the positions I was familiar with—at least as I understood them.

Ellul: Traditional Christian Approaches to Violence

Ellul begins *Violence* by explaining and evaluating three traditional Christian approaches to violence. He first summarizes what over time became the "just war theory." This stance accepts that the State has the right to use force, and saw the church's role as determining whether the State used force justly or not. Theologians developed a list of seven conditions that must be in order for a war to be considered just:

the cause fought for must itself be just; the purpose of the warring power must remain just while hostilities go on; war must be truly the last resort, all peaceful means having been exhausted; the methods employed during the war to vanquish the foe must themselves be just; the benefits the war can reasonably be expected to bring for humanity must be greater than the evils provoked by the war itself; victory must be assured; the peace concluded at the end of the war must be just and of such nature as to prevent a new war.¹

Ellul acknowledges that these conditions have theoretical solidity. He questions, however, if we can apply them in our age of modern warfare with the same certainty they were applied in the Middle Ages. He also questions the underlying assumption that humans can control violence and keep it in the service of order and justice.

In conclusion Ellul calls this position a solution of compromise. He supposes the reasoning behind it ran something like this: "We certainly have to live in society. These are no longer the days of the first Christian generation, when extreme uncompromising attitudes were possible. We must accommodate ourselves to the situation that exists; we must become part of it if we are to go on living."²

1. Ellul, *Violence*, 6.

2. *Ibid.*, 9.

He next addresses the nonviolent position which goes back to the beginnings of the church. In fact it appears to have been the dominant position in the early church, with most Christians refusing to serve in the army until the fourth century. There are two common versions today: One approach to nonviolence centers on the person. "It is in being himself at peace that a man becomes peaceful; it is in living the love of God that he becomes capable of manifesting that love; it is through his practice of it in his personal life that nonviolence spreads to society."³ The second approach centers on the military and its growing power. It recognizes that an oppressive or unjust government can remain in power only because of the armed force it has behind it. Therefore, the aim of nonviolence is this: "the state must be divested of its instruments of violence; and, for their part, proponents of nonviolence must respond to the state's use of violence by nonviolent actions."⁴ Gandhi is heralded as an example of this position put in practice, but Ellul questions whether Gandhi would have had the same success in all situations, in Russia in 1925 or Germany in 1933? He also questions the assumption that a government can maintain itself without ever using violence. (And, as we will see in a moment, in relation to the first Ellul is critical of those who see this as a strategy for making society non-violent.)

The third position, which like the first two has a long history, is Christians for violence. Some hermits of the Nile valley during the third and fourth centuries first carried out this idea. They went into cities, beating up people and smashing everything in sight. "They took it upon themselves to punish sinners here and now and to manifest God's judgment on the world in concrete ways."⁵ Since then, however, Christians have more commonly supported violence when they see it as a means to liberate the oppressed. Often this position uses Christianity to justify or legitimize revolutionary or political actions. (Bombing abortion clinics or killing doctors who perform abortions would be a contemporary North American example of this category.) Although firmly committed to helping the suffering, they willingly inflict violence on others and cause them to suffer.

Ellul concludes by saying that all three positions are alike in the respect that they all insist upon a Christian "solution," a valid way of organizing society. (Although that does not always have to be the case with the first

3. *Ibid.*, 13.

4. *Ibid.*, 14.

5. *Ibid.*, 17.

aspect of the second position above.) They attempt to formulate a compromise between the demands of Christ and the necessities of the world. They want to reorganize society along Christian lines, but have forgotten that this world has absolutely rejected Jesus Christ. Ellul believes that "we are invited to take part in a dialectic, to be in the world but not of it, and thus seek out a particular, a specifically Christian position."⁶ He sets out to do this in the rest of the book.

Ellul: Laws of Violence

Ellul first desires to take a realistic look at violence, seeing the facts as they are and grasping them thoroughly. As a Christian, Ellul has an advantage over others in attempting this task. Terrible as the reality may be, he can analyze the reality without despairing because of his hope in Jesus Christ. Ellul bases his realistic look at violence on study and experience. He states that he has on several occasions participated in movements that used violence, including the Spanish Civil War, and the French Resistance during the Second World War.⁷

He begins his appraisal by pointing out "that every state is founded on violence and cannot maintain itself save by and through violence."⁸ Violence is universal, and it is also of the order of Necessity. "I do not say violence is a necessity, but rather that a man (or a group) subject to the order of Necessity follows the given trends, be these emotional, structural, sociological, or economic. He ceases to be an independent, initiating agent; he is part of a system in which nothing has weight or meaning; and so far as he obeys these inescapable compulsions he is no longer a moral being."⁹

Ellul concludes that violence is inevitable. He then turns to the consequences of violence, and outlines five laws of violence.

6. *Ibid.*, 26.

7. Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, 18.

8. Ellul, *Violence*, 84.

9. *Ibid.*, 91.

The First Law of Violence is Continuity

Once you start using violence you will continue to use it. Violence is easier and more practical than other methods, dialogue for instance. Revolutions born in violence set up a reign of violence for a generation or two.

The Second Law of Violence is Reciprocity

Here Ellul borrows Jesus' words from Matthew 26:52 and writes that all who live by the sword will die by the sword. Jesus makes no distinction between good and bad use of the sword. All "violence creates violence, begets violence and procreates violence."¹⁰

The Third Law of Violence is Sameness

In this law Ellul is not evaluating the reasons violence is used, and saying you can't make any distinction between better and worse reasons for using violence. Rather he is writing about the violent act itself. If you are shot by "justified violence" or "unjustified" it feels the same, has same affect. Whether a bomb is detonated for justified reasons or as an act of terror the explosion and destruction are the same. In that sense that you cannot distinguish between justified violence and unjustified violence. Ellul is not saying the purposes for using violence are the same, rather he seeks to lead us to recognize that even if we may have good reasons to justify use of violence, it is still violent.

Ellul also maintains that we should not try to differentiate between physical violence and economic violence or psychological violence. "The velvet-glove violence of the powerful who maintain the regimes of injustice, exploitation profiteering, and hatred has its exact counterpart in the iron-fist violence of the oppressed."¹¹ Violence is the same also in the sense that you cannot in reality put limits on it. If you condone violence it is impossible to say "So far and no further." We have seen the impossibility of setting up laws of warfare, or we can imagine the impossibility of putting limits on torture. "The man who starts torturing necessarily goes to the limit; for if he decides to torture in order to get information, that information is very important; and if, having used a 'reasonable' kind of torture, he does not

10. *Ibid.*, 95.

11. *Ibid.*, 98.

get the information he wants, what then? He will use worse torture."¹² An implication of the sameness of violence is that if we use violence ourselves we have to consent to our adversary using it. A government that maintains itself by violence cannot protest when others use violence against it. In the same way, rioters or revolutionaries often seem to think that all the "rights" are on their side, they complain about police brutality, but what about their own brutality?

The Fourth Law of Violence is That Violence Begets Violence—Nothing Else.

People say we have a good goal, but unfortunately we have to use violence to achieve it, but it does not happen. Mao or Castro did not bring justice. As Ellul said, "Violence can never realize a noble aim . . . evil means corrupt good ends. But I repeat also: 'Let the man who wants to use violence, do so; let him know what he is doing.' That is all the Christian can ask of this man."¹³

At first glance this appears to be an Ellulian overstatement, and there might be some of that. But I think we should focus on the "corrupting." He is not saying that violent force doesn't change things, and to some degree "accomplish" things, but as Martin Luther King Jr. said:

Through violence you may murder a murderer, but you can't murder murder.

Through violence you may murder a liar, but you can't establish truth.

Through violence you may murder a hater, but you can't murder hate.

Darkness cannot put out darkness. Only light can do that.¹⁴

Violence is expedient, it changes things, but it is not a solution in the profound sense. The power (using the word in the sense of *echthroi*, "principalities and powers") embodied in militarism tells us the opposite—that violence can be redemptive. It tells us that more bombs and bullets will bring more control. It deceives us into thinking we are solving a problem when we use force, or that we have no other option, but to use force.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 102.

14. King, "Where Do We Go from Here?"

The Fifth Law of Violence is That Those Who Use it Try to Justify Violence and Themselves.

I could see the truth of Ellul's laws in history. I thought that I would not say them quite as strongly as he did, yet in essence I agreed with him. (As I continued to read other Ellul books I discovered how much he likes to make extreme statements, and I later understood why he makes them.) What troubled me most, however, at this point in his book, were the implications of what he had written. On one hand he states that violence is of the order of Necessity and inevitable, on the other hand he takes a very negative view toward violence and what it will accomplish. I had come to the book with doubts about the pacifist position of some Christians because it did not seem feasible. Can you really expect a country to not have an army or police force, to not use violence? In a sense I found Ellul's position even more confusing because he did not deny that a country would have to use force, yet he takes a negative position towards using force. Looking back I can now see that I was having my first encounter with Ellul's dialectical thinking. Naturally this clashed with my traditional black and white, either or, way of looking at the world. "Combat" and John Wayne did not present a dialectical view of violence.

Ellul: The Fight of Faith

Although no less dialectical, Ellul's next chapter, "The Fight of Faith," answered the questions he had left me with. He answered one question I had by explaining that although a Christian should remind the State that they are responsible to God she cannot demand that the State not use violence—that would be suicide for the State. "Christians must not require others to act as if they were Christians . . . If an ethic is Christian, it is a product of the faith." To demand that non-Christians live by this ethic would be to set up objectives they can neither understand nor obtain.¹⁵ The role of the Christian is to try to limit the effects and remedy the causes of violence. "But we shall not be able to deter men from violence."¹⁶ We should marvel, when peace breaks out.

Ellul explains that unfortunately Christians make the mistake of accepting that which is necessary and inevitable as legitimate. "This is

15. Ellul, *Violence*, 159–60.

16. Ibid., 158.

anti-Christian reasoning par excellence. What Christ does for us is above all to make us free . . . to have true freedom is to escape necessity or, rather, to be free to struggle against necessity. Therefore I say that only one line of action is open to the Christian who is free in Christ. He must struggle against violence precisely because, apart from Christ, violence is the form that human relations normally and necessarily take."¹⁷ So, just as Ellul acknowledges that we cannot expect the State to behave in a Christian way free from Necessity, he demands the opposite of Christians. "The better we understand that violence is necessary, indispensable, inevitable, the better shall we be able to reject and oppose it. If we are free in Jesus Christ, we shall reject violence precisely because violence is necessary."¹⁸

Christians must always side with the oppressed—often violence will seem the easiest way to help them—but Ellul states that "the appeal to and use of violence in Christian action increase in exact proportion to the decrease in faith."¹⁹ The main duty of the Christian today is to act as a mediator, to plead the cause of the oppressed before the powerful. At times the Christian may find him or herself working with people who are involved in a violent struggle, but she must never condone their violence. In fact, the Christian should try to help them see their violence in a realistic light.

To show that her action was not ideological a Christian must switch sides if the oppressed become the oppressors. Ellul cites his own experience in France during the Second World War. At the end of the war, the oppressors—traitors during the war—became the persecuted. At that point the Christian should have switched from attempting to mediate for the Resistance to attempting to protect the persecuted from the now victorious Resistance.

Because violence is of the realm of necessity in this world there will always be the temptation for the Christian to use violence as a last resort. In conclusion, however, Ellul states that for the Christian the true last resort is prayer, resort to God. In a situation of violence this may prove much more difficult than taking up arms. For instance, Ellul wrote this book when the Black Power movement in the United States was on the rise. He writes:

How is it that, in the midst of the racial struggle going on in the United States today, so many white Christians leave to black Christians the appanage of nonviolence? Why do they not take

17. *Ibid.*, 127.

18. *Ibid.*, 130.

19. *Ibid.*, 149.

the way of repentance and conciliation in the face of black violence—repentance for the violence the whites committed in the past? Why, in the face of the black violence they provoked, do they not now seek 'peace at any price'? It is only by love that is total, without defense, without reservation, love that does not calculate or bargain, that the white Christian will overcome the evil of revolution, arson, and looting. . . . Neither exaltation of power nor the search for vengeance will ever solve any human situation. In accepting death, Jesus Christ showed us the only possible way. We may refuse to take it. But we must realize that when we refuse we are left with one alternative—increasing the sum of evil in the world. And we ought to be honest and renounce all pretensions to the Christian faith."²⁰

To some this may seem an escape. Ellul admits that some will say that Christians are absent from the world because they refuse to participate in the necessity of violence, but he ends his book with these words:

Will it be said that Christians are absent from the world? Curious that "presence in the world," should mean accepting the world's ways, means, objectives; should mean helping hate and evil to proliferate! Christians will be sufficiently and completely present in the world if they suffer with those who suffer, if they seek out with those sufferers the one way of salvation, if they bear witness before God and man to the consequences of injustice and the proclamation of love."²¹

Where Ellul Brought Me

I had left the refugee camp with conflicting perspectives. My gut told me both sides in the conflict were wrong. My head, which was still operating from a, good-guy and bad-guy mindset, told me that it was intellectually unacceptable to not support one side or the other. My head told me I was copping out by criticizing both sides. Furthermore, my gut told me violence was wrong, my head told me that was not a realistic position.

Ellul's book connected with what my gut told me, and it convinced my head that as a Christian this was an intellectually acceptable position.

20. *Ibid.*, 174.

21. *Ibid.*, 175.

JACQUES ELLUL ON VIOLENCE, RESISTANCE, AND WAR

A year earlier I would have had trouble understanding Ellul's message; four years earlier I would not have even given him a chance.

My trip to the refugee camp brought my black and white world view crumbling down because I could not fit the things I heard there into a clear and neat, right-wrong framework. Reading *Violence* by Ellul helped me see the weaknesses of my former way of viewing things. For instance a "good guys—bad guys" world view very easily leads to an "ends justify the means" attitude. Deciding that someone else was bad allowed me to think that anything we, the good guys, did to stop them was acceptable. My own experience helped me see that the good guys and bad guys cannot be so neatly divided. Ellul showed me the danger of thinking the ends can justify the means. In fact he demonstrated that the means affect the end. Corrupt means, like violence, corrupt the desired end. Ellul also opened up a whole new way of approaching issues. Before I had pragmatically looked at what options the world had to offer and tried as a Christian to select the best one. Ellul challenged me to look deeper and to go beyond what the world offered.

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