

A Honduran Mayor's Experience of Ellul's Political Illusion *by Mark Baker*

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In the midst of introducing me to his boss, and greeting my family, Jacobo Sanchez pulled me aside just long enough to say, "Ellul was right!" In a way that said it all. I knew what he meant. At the same time Jacobo's statement begged for further explanation and conversation. Questions immediately flooded my mind. This chance meeting in La Ceiba, Honduras, a city neither of us lived in, did not, however, allow for that conversation. I vowed to myself that on a future visit to Honduras I would visit Jacobo and follow-up on that comment.

In the early 1980's, fresh out of college, I taught at an evangelical bi-lingual school in Tegucigalpa. I met Jacobo, at that time a university student studying chemical engineering. He was charismatic, confident and fun to be with. We spent hours in wide ranging conversation. Many of my beliefs and assumptions were shaken by the poverty and injustices in Honduras and the revolutions in neighboring countries. Jacobo enthusiastically encouraged my critical thinking. (He, a Catholic, also challenged and transformed my conceptions of Catholics.) We became soul mates. We actively sought to convince others that working for justice for the poor and oppressed was central to the Christian faith, and we reflected on ways we could do that ourselves in the present and future.

I also first encountered Ellul's writing in that time period. Jacobo and I read and discussed a number of Ellul's books. Ellul added to our growing sense that a commitment to God called for commitment to radical change. Ellul also challenged us to think more critically about the means we might use to bring change—including the use of political power. I interpreted Ellul as warning us against the political option, yet it was easy for me to be negative about an option I did not realistically have. Jacobo, however, read *The Political Illusion* and *The Politics of God*,

Politics of Man from a different setting than I did. He knew politicians. For him becoming an elected government leader, or a high level bureaucrat, was not an unrealistic idea. Jacobo took Ellul's warning seriously, but rather than ruling out participation in politics Jacobo entered the fray with the hope that because of what he had learned he could be a different type of politician.

In 1985 Jacobo's uncle, Oscar Mejía Arellano, became a candidate for President and Jacobo worked in his campaign. His uncle lost, and in January 1986 Jacobo shared the following reflections with me. (In June of 1983 I returned to the United States. I went to Honduras each summer, and while there visited Jacobo until he graduated and returned to his home city El Progreso. His words are excerpts from a transcription of a cassette recording he sent me in January 1986).

I had the chance to travel around the country and see hunger, sickness, and ignorance in my people. I saw a lot of problems that need to be solved. I was happy because I thought I would have some power, some power to solve these problems. That was the beginning of the process. . . As the days were passing by I was changing. I was thinking just about power, the sweet taste of power. . . I started seeing myself in a suit with a silk shirt in this big air conditioned office, with a big desk, in comfortable chair--sitting there having people coming asking me for favors. . . I am not saying I'd be a corrupt person. . . In the back of my mind, of course were big dreams, big concerns about the people, . . . but I lost perspective.

I was in the this boat and we were sailing in the water of politics and I had realized that the important thing was to keep yourself within the boat. You could see a lot of people swimming around, trying to get into the boat, and some people within the boat pushing them and drowning them. And I was there thinking, "that's good because then I won't have to fight anyone else for my share of power." I was thinking that, and I am a Christian! I love my

neighbors, but I was becoming part of this, becoming selfish. . .

You have to be really careful because the gap between the powerful and the oppressed becomes wider all the time. In my speeches I was saying we'd seek justice, health, education and agrarian reform. When I was saying things like that I really meant them because I think it's what is best. But I was on a stage seven or eight feet above the ground and I didn't talk to my people. No, I was with the men on stage, and when we talked among ourselves we did not talk about the needs of the people. . . I remember we were developing a strategy so we could gain more power in the congress and the supreme court. We were just seeking power, power, power. . . And they were saying, "I'm going to buy this house," "this farm," "buy that car," "get this for my family." I never heard, "We have to do this for the people." I never said it. . .

I'm telling these things to you because I know you love me and will pray for me so that I can see the light and gain more wisdom. . . I know your ideals and your dreams and how much you love my people. I love my people too, and I am seeking justice for them. I know that this feeling that burns within me was set there by God. I failed.

Jacobo's first foray in politics confirmed many things he had read in Ellul. He continued to read Ellul, and still had a burning passion to rectify situations of injustice and to lessen the suffering of the poor. His experience in politics had left him feeling great disappointment and disillusionment. He had, however, learned that he could give speeches that moved people. He loved to see how people had reacted to his words, and the thought played in his mind: "why give speeches for others? Why not speak for myself?" Four years later he did. In 1989 he ran for mayor of El Progreso, the third largest city in Honduras. He won the election and became mayor in 1990.

In the summer of 1990 my wife and I, once again living in Honduras, ran a two-month program for some university students involved with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in New York state. On our way to the beach for their final debriefing we passed through El Progreso and I had arranged for us to visit Jacobo. I had not seen him for a few years. He sat behind a large desk in an air conditioned office. Aides sat as his side. While talking to our group various people interrupted the meeting to get his signature, ask a question, or to report someone was waiting for him. He dealt with each one quickly and returned to his animated description of the changes he was trying to bring about in the city; how he was using his power to help others. For instance, he explained how he helped the poor and

landless to get land. I felt a mix of things—excited by what he was accomplishing, yet wondering if he was remembering the lessons he had learned in 1986.

I was even more confused when, two years later, I read in the Honduran newspapers that Jacobo was in Jail and accused of misusing public funds. He was forced out of office. In the end he was found innocent. The real story was that he had been betrayed by some in his own party who saw him as a threat to politics as usual. I left Honduras that year to begin my doctoral studies, and did not see Jacobo again for over ten years until, as noted above, we ran into each other by chance in another city.

Now two years had passed. I was once again visiting Honduras and Jacobo came to Tegucigalpa to spend the afternoon with me. He immediately began explaining the phrase he had mentioned to me two years earlier. "You know that book you gave me by Jacques Ellul, 'The Political Illusion,' it's true." Yes, he had read it before he became mayor and acknowledged the reality of Ellul's insights, but he aimed to be different. Re-reading it four years after his time as mayor, however, he had read more realistically and honestly. It served as a helpful tool for reflection. True he had taken positive actions—things he is grateful he had the opportunity to do. He did not just give handouts, but began projects that people worked themselves to obtain the results. He grew in his speaking ability, but also became ever more enamored with the feeling of being able to move a crowd. He learned to say the things they wanted to hear. The longer he was in office the more absorbed he became in seeking power for himself, the more he was changed by the power he obtained, and the more he found himself using laudable goals to justify questionable means.

Looking back he can see how the power changed and corrupted him. He did not see it at the time. He thought he was avoiding what Ellul warned us about. While he was mayor, one aide, Sergio, told him, "you are changing." Jacobo ignored him, and listened to all the others that praised him. Ironically after Jacobo lost his position Sergio was the only one who continued to visit him. All the others disappeared.

We had a great discussion that afternoon. It fascinated me to hear his insights on politics today—global and Honduran. After two hours, however, I leaned forward and asked, "But where are you today? What about all our talk of justice 20 some years ago?" He looked at me and said, "I think about it every day when I wake up, and a plaque of Isaiah 58 hangs behind my desk at work."

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the

yoke, to let the oppressed go free....

Then he described changes he has made at the factory he runs, changes resisted by the owner, changes that have required him to confront other powers that Ellul has written about. That, however, is material for another article.
