Pro Rege

Volume 15 | Number 4 Article 8

June 1987

Subversion of Christianity (Book Review)

Nick Van Til
Dordt College

student who is especially interested in curriculum development, chapters seven and eight present some challenging reading. Chapter seven, "Quests for Purpose: Divergent Curriculum Orientations (1945-1977)" deals with some of the problems schools faced in trying to develop distinctive curricula, particularly within the National Union of Christian Schools. Chapter eight, "Dealing with Curriculum Issues: Some Examples (1945-1977)" identifies quite clearly the direction Canadian schools took in curricular development and its impact on "American" schools and the National Union of Christian Schools (Christian Schools International).

The writing style was not always as clear as I would have liked. Several times I found myself going back to catch the meaning of the line.

The book is very well organized. Each chapter begins with an overview of the chapter and frequent references are made within each chapter to material covered before as well as to ideas which will be presented later. The material in the book is extremely well documented. Notes at the end of each chapter and ample bibliographic information at the end of the book provide the reader with all the resource material necessary.

Van Brummelen has done the Christian schools of North America a distinct service. Education departments in our Christian colleges would do well to include the book on their recommended reading list if not on the required list.

The Christian and Alcoholic Beverages: A Biblical Perspective. Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1986. 113 pages. $4.95. Reviewed by Glenda Droogsma, Director of Personal Counseling.

Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., begins his discussion of a proper Christian attitude regarding alcoholic beverages by establishing the Bible as his starting point and supreme standard for defining Christian ethics. He introduces his topic by outlining three commonly held Christian views: (1) Prohibitionist—alcohol consumption is forbidden in Scripture as a matter of law. (2) Abstentionist—though alcohol is not forbidden, the Christian should abstain as a matter of love. (3) Moderationist—consumption is permissible if moderate and circumspect. Gentry states that his purpose is not to change the reader's consumption, but to study what Scripture teaches about alcoholic beverages and to develop a Christian ethical standard. It is obvious in this first chapter that Gentry's own research concluded with the moderationist's view as a proper Christian perspective.

In the remaining two chapters Gentry develops his arguments against the prohibitionist and abstentionist views. He first summarizes the prohibitionist's view of Scripture's complete condemnation of alcohol abuse. Following this he discusses Old and New Testament references to wine and analyzes various Hebrew and Greek terms. Demonstrating that the wine used in Biblical time did contain alcohol, Gentry refutes the prohibitionist's arguments that all positive Biblical statements about "wine" refer to non-alcoholic grape juice. This discussion opposing the prohibitionist's view is convincing and biblically supported.

In his argument against the abstentionist view, Gentry studies the Bible's teaching on Christian liberty with a verse-by-verse analysis of Romans 14. Gentry's most valuable point in this section is his summary of Paul's teaching to the "weak" and "strong" believer. To the weak: "If the weak one does so (criticizes or judges the strong), he is censoring one who is fully accepted by God in the matter." To the strong: "Paul expresses strong emphasis, as if to say 'You must truly and fully receive the weak into your fellowship!' The openness of their reception is further seen in that the strong are not to receive them 'for the purpose of passing judgment' on their weak opinions" (74-75). Gentry emphasizes that the Christian response, no matter what position one holds, should be mutual concern and edification. Gentry's conclusions regarding Christian liberty are less conclusive against the abstentionist position and left me with questions.

The weakest section of Gentry's book is his discussion of the "potential alcoholic" in the first appendix. I found it too brief and superficial for the importance of the topic to Christians. His knowledge of alcoholism is limited and ignores significant current research on chemical addiction.

After reading Gentry's introductory chapter, I was eager to read a book that addressed the topic by beginning from Scripture rather than by beginning with a position and using Scripture to prove it. Even though I was pleased with his extensive use of Scripture, I felt he did not always live up to his promise to begin with Scripture. Many statements seem directed at counteracting previous alternative interpretations of the Scripture passages. Gentry repeatedly refers to other writers, and without a minimal knowledge of the literature, readers will find his discussion at times confusing.

However, in spite of its weaknesses, this book works from a biblical foundation to defend the moderationist's position and would be valuable to Christians evaluating their own attitudes on alcoholic beverages.

The Subversion of Christianity. Jacques Ellul. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986. 212 pages. $9.95. Reviewed by Nick R. Van Til, Professor of Philosophy Emeritus.

This is the fortieth book by Jacques Ellul, recently retired from his position as Professor of Law and the Sociology and History of Institutions at the University of Bordeaux, France. More than half are available in English with his *The*

Ethics of Freedom and *Technological Society* perhaps the most widely read.

The Subversion of Christianity, as one may surmise from the title, is concerned with what Ellul considers secular and non-revelational incursions into authentic Christianity. Some of the subversions under discussion have been recognized at least as long ago as the Protestant Reformation. Some Protestant observers see the subversion of Christianity as clearly related to the over-institutionalizing of the church. Those beginnings are often traced back to the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. when the Roman emperor Constantine gave Christianity legal status and began using it to help unify his empire.

Ellul goes back beyond 313 A.D. He writes:

> It seems to me that everything goes back to a phenomenal change in the understanding of revelation, namely the transition from history to philosophy. I believe all the errors in Christian thought go back to this. (23)

Theologians regularly subverted Christianity by their tendency to let preconceived ideas lead them into wrong interpretation of revelation. Ellul gives a list of theologians from Irenaeus (d. 202 A.D.) to Hans Küng of our day:

> They had intellectual, metaphysical and epistemological questions, etc., and they adduced the biblical text with a view to providing a system of answers to their questions. They used the biblical text to meet their own needs instead of listening to what it really was (even Calvin, alas). (23)

Strongly under Barthian influence, Ellul opposes systemizing of revelation by human reason. This opposition is further evident presently when he discusses Christianity and morality.

According to Ellul, several subversions followed from what has often been called "Constantinianism." The first of these is the massification of the church. With its new legal status and the support of Constantine, Christianity became popular. Many now came into the church who had not been touched by a personal conversion experience by which they were committed to a life in Christ. This seriously diluted the spiritual quality of the life of the church. Several other evils followed.

With the masses not living by a personal study of revelation, it was necessary to provide a moral regimen whereby church members could live. That regimen presently turned into a list of church rules that provided a work-righteousness way to heaven. The church was thus subverted by moralism. Church members then participated in substitutionary atonement only symbolically through the mass.

Another evil grew out of massification, the resacralization of daily life. Jesus had desacralized the physical context of worship when he said that it was not dependent upon some "here or there" or "this or that." Worship in spirit and in truth disassociated worship from things and places. But some untutored laity were reluctant to give up household gods and pagan feast days. The church acquiesced and gave the laity a galaxy of saints as well as feast days and holy places.

Ellul sees these accretions as subversions which prevent Christians from living the Christian life according to revelation in a moment-by-moment personal association with the Word without any mediation by a hierarchy or a theological and moral system.

Ellul devotes a chapter each to "Moralism," "The Influence of Islam," and "Political Perversion." The discussion of moralism is of particular interest because of the way Ellul contrasts morality and Christianity. If we define moralism as a system of rewards and punishments whereby we become entitled to salvation, most evangelical Christians would agree that it is a subversion of Christianity. But most would conclude that Ellul presents us with a puzzle when he writes:

> God's revelation has nothing to do with morality. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.... Biblically the good is in fact the will of God. That is all. What God decides, whatever it may be, is the good. If then, we decide what the good is, we substitute our own will for God's. We construct a morality when we say (and do) what is good, and it is then that we are radically sinners. To elaborate a moral system is to show one a sinner before God, because, even if it is good, another good is substituted for the will of God. (69,70)

Thomists, no doubt, will react to the fact that Ellul commits himself to a simon-pure voluntarism, but the crux of his arguments rests with the designation "moral system." "System" circumscribes the moment-to-moment freedom which we have in Christ through his Word. It ties us to the past and prescribes for the future. Morality wrongly imposes restrictions.

> Freedom does not mean that we can do nothing at all. It is freedom of love. Love, which cannot be regulated, categorized or analyzed into principles or commandments, takes the place of law. The relationship with others is not one of duty but love.... No fixed duty has to be done no matter what course life may take. (71)

For Ellul, love operates in the moving history and subjectivity of one's personal life. It escapes the call of duty. But his predilections aside, Ellul does not establish a biblical warrant for setting love and duty over against one another. It seems to me that the love commandments found in Matthew 22 and John 13 clearly impose a duty even though a loving response demands wholehearted and personal spontaneity.

About half of Ellul's chapter on moralism is devoted to exorcising anti-feminism from Christian thought. He alleges that the church's moralizing was particularly evident in the

"sexual sphere":

> Women were the chief victims of the reaction. Anti-feminism is one of the important points at which Christianity's betrayal of God's revelation is apparent. (73)

We are given an historical and exegetical survey of the question and those influences which brought about anti-feminism in the churches as well as Ellul's counterpoints. Generally, he has subscribed to the idea that we should read the Bible in a straightforward manner. In so doing, we are less likely to be confronted by "hermeneutical crises." Here, however, he calls on the cultural context of the first century A.D. to explain the words of the apostle Paul in I Timothy and in the letters to the Corinthians with respect to the question of "women in ecclesiastical offices."

Ellul asks us to remember how important women were in Greek and Near Eastern cults

> in celebrating mysteries, in passions or by divine spirit in trances, outbursts, ecstasies, proclamations, etc. Most of these cults were orgiastic. ...What Paul is saying, then, is that in gatherings of the saints things should not be as in the orgiastic cults. Everything must be in order. ...Women who are generally more "inspired" should on the contrary be silent, should not speak in tongues (this is the issue in the text) and if they prophesy (this is no contradiction) they should do so with their heads covered, the essential point being to show that they are subject to an authority that controls what they say. (81)

Those today who oppose "women in ecclesiastical offices" invariably claim that they read the Bible in a straightforward manner and in so doing come to their conclusions. No doubt they would fault Ellul for inconsistency here.

Ellul makes several points in his chapter on "The Influence of Islam." The most interesting in terms of present Near Eastern turmoil is the Islamic idea if "Jihad," that is, holy war. That idea enjoyed an early transfer into Christendom. In fact, it was appropriated by Pope Urban II when he went to France in the late eleventh century to preach the first Crusade at Clermont. As the counterpart of the Islamic heaven of sensual pleasure, the Pope promised the crusaders a plenary indulgence. That amounted to being granted complete detour around purgatory at the time of death in return for going on a crusade.

A chapter is devoted to "Political Perversion" which began like other subversions as a spin-off of Constantinianism. That discussion is followed by a chapter on "Nihilism and Christianity." For an opener Ellul makes this enigmatic statement:

> Now it might seem at first glance that Christianity is the very opposite of nihilism, but alas, things are not as simple as that, and Christianity is in fact the root of all the historical evil of modern nihilism. (140)

As a kind of second thought this allegation is somewhat modified by a footnote on the same page which reads:

> There is, of course, no need to recall that Christianity is not the only factor and does not bear sole responsibility for modern nihilism.

Without going into the details of Ellul's explanation, I can sum up by noting his suggestion that nihilism as related to Christianity comes by way of the implications of the idea of transcendence, a call for desacralization and the doctrine of sin. What is notably missing in Ellul's discussion here is the nihilist's voluntary act of unbelief as the basic impetus towards nihilism.

There are three more chapters but I will refer briefly only to the one titled "The Heart of the Problem." And the heart of the problem is the vital fact that all the subversions of Christianity attempt to take away the "scandal of the cross."

> Here is the difficulty: it is not at all that of showing that official Christianity is not the Christianity of the New Testament, but that of showing that New Testament Christianity and what it implies to be a Christian are profoundly disagreeable to us. (154)

With this and many like assertions Ellul challenges us to rethink our appropriation of Christianity to determine whether it is according to revelation or according to some favorite subversion.

Gene Outka wrote concerning Ellul's *The Ethics of Freedom*,

> I do think that Ellul makes the reader suffer unwarrantably in this book from repetitive and obscure passages. He too often opts for rhetorical effectiveness even when this results in intellectual obfuscation.[1]

This work carries a tinge of the same weakness but whatever the difficulties, they do not obscure the fact that Ellul presents us with challenges which are worth considering even when that consideration does not result in agreement.

[1]Gene Outka, "Discontinuity in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul," *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays*, Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook, Editors (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1981), p. 189.