The Humiliation of the Word (preface)  
by Jacques Ellul

Jacques Ellul was Professor of Law and Sociology and History of Institutions at the University of Bordeaux. He has published several hundred articles and over thirty books. This book was published by Williams B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1985.

For years, Jacques Ellul has warned repeatedly that our modern addiction to images is a kind of terrorist time bomb ominously ticking away in the comfortable hotel of free democratic society. The Humiliation of the Word powerfully and convincingly demonstrates the wholesale abuse of language and this dangerous addiction to images characteristic of modern society. Public officials are "electable" in the United States today only if they project an attractive television image. Reaction to presidential "debates," for example, depends almost entirely on image, not substance, truth, or coherent rational argument.

Similarly, the Church indulges our desire to "feel good" instead of responding to our need to be spiritually challenged and fed through solid exposition of the Scriptures. The electronic Church in particular panders to our appetite for entertainment rather than authentic discipleship and maturity.

Ellul’s response to such incoherent flabbiness is spelled out in this book, and can be summed up in his words: "Anyone wishing to save humanity today must first of all save the word." Like most of Ellul’s themes, his view of the problems of language and image stems from ideas already present in his seminal The Presence of the Kingdom (1948).

One of the key problems for modern thinking Christians at that time, in Ellul’s view, was the problem of communication, to which he devoted one of the book’s chapters. There he confronts his reader with the technically determined, choice of facts made available through the mass media, the distortion of language by the media (with which dialogue is impossible), and their tendency to distract and entertain rather than to stimulate reflection. Propaganda has replaced the commonly held ideas made communication between persons possible. Films’ destructive power relates in part to language.

Ellul’s proposed solution to the complex of problems presented in The Presence of the Kingdom is the discovery of a new language. This is the only way understanding can begin to flow again, so that we can communicate the gospel in such a way that it "penetrates."

Except for certain changes of emphasis and the addition of technical and sociological developments since 1948, The Humiliation of the Word can be viewed as the development of Ellul’s early concerns about language in The Presence of the Kingdom. He cannot be accused of having "mellowed with age," however. This volume’s sharp attacks on audiovisual methods, television, souvenir photography, structuralism, and modern art will strike some readers as overdone. But those familiar with the author’s previous works will
recognize in his polemic an effort to arouse our image-lulled consciousness and move us to do battle.

In the interim since *The Presence of the Kingdom*, Ellul has, of course, written often about language before finally dedicating an entire book to the theme. The select subject index in my *Jacques Ellul: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1984) lists major references to *speech* or the *word* in nine of Ellul’s forty books (others could have been added), as well as in ten of his six-hundred-odd articles.

In *Prayer and Modern Man* (1970), for example, Ellul examines the difficulties we experience in prayer stemming from our present "tragic crisis of language, in which words can no longer attain the level of speech." The failure of language produces a lack of personal relationships and a feeling that words are not only inadequate (Rom. 8:26) but pointless.

In *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (1972), Ellul devotes a section to the "Death of the Word," in which he examines briefly the phenomenon he calls "the disintegration of language." Propaganda, the meaningless multiplication of words, the disassociation of the word from the person speaking it, and society’s increasing dependence on images -- all contribute to the picture Ellul draws of a world with no solution and no future. These same aspects of the problem of language in our day become major sections of *The Humiliation of the Word*.

Before writing his books on prayer and hope, Ellul had already published *Propaganda* (1962), which the present volume complements and updates in several respects. *Propaganda* was the first of Ellul’s books to isolate one element of *The Technological Society* (1954) for in-depth study. Later he devoted several volumes to the impact of Technique on different aspects of modern society. *The Humiliation of the Word* marks his latest contribution to this series.

In the theological sphere, Ellul deals with the relationship of language and faith in his *Living Faith* (1980), where he emphasizes the need for confidence in the words of those who witness to salvation history if we are to believe. He also mentions the confidence in Jesus which enables us to believe his words, and the danger of separating the words from the person of Jesus. These themes undergird the fundamental argument of the present volume.

Just a year before *The Humiliation of the Word* Ellul published his work on art and Technique, *L’Empire du non-sens* (1981). This art book refers with extraordinary frequency to language, and the present book on language often calls on art to illustrate a point. In fact, the two works overlap considerably, especially in the chapter entitled "Message and Compensation" in *L’Empire du non-sens*. Ellul’s difficult book on art is best read in conjunction with the present volume, since they often deal with common problems of communication and meaning. Ellul also previously expressed some of the basic arguments of *The Humiliation of the Word* in "Notes innocentes sur la ‘question herméneutique’" (published in *L’Evangile*)...
hier et anjourd’hui: Mélanges offerts au Professeur Franz J. Leenhardt [Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1968]). But now at last he has considered the question of the modern crisis in language at length, and we can follow his thinking in ordered steps rather than in scattered, specialized bits.

Besides the spirited attacks already mentioned, in this book Ellul also criticizes icons and images as idols, along with computers, comic strips, slogans, technical efficiency, the death-of-God theology, and political and liturgical spectacle. Although Ellul himself responds in his last chapter to the potential criticism of this book as sheer negativism, the fundamental positive thrust here should not be overlooked. He has not written an essentially negative book, criticizing the preponderance of images. His basic aim is not to denigrate images but to liberate language as the fundamental weapon in the struggle for human freedom. Only as it relates to language does he deal with the problem of images. Ellul deals positively with language: its essence, its value, and its relationship to freedom. In this sense The Humiliation of the Word is a continuation of the author’s The Ethics of Freedom (1973-1984).

Many of Ellul’s books can be viewed primarily as efforts to attack or even demolish something. But The Humiliation of the Word belongs with Ellul’s more constructive books, most of which are theological. Like many of his more positive studies, the present book devotes a heavy proportion of its space to exploring oppressive factors and forces in the area under investigation, but its main thrust is not negative.

We have heedlessly capitulated to the allure of images, and thus language has been dethroned from its proper preeminence in human affairs. Our preference for images has corrupted and distorted language, which has become sound without sense. In a similar manner, Ellul has shown earlier that we have preferred the wrong sort of revolution (Autopsy of Revolution, Changer de révolution), given ourselves to the wrong sort of prayer (Prayer and Modern Man), allowed the idolatrous city to dominate our affections (The Meaning of the City), and substituted facile belief for vital faith (Living Faith). In most of these situations something good and necessary has been either corrupted or blown up out of proportion, so that it dominates what it should be subject to. Such lack of proportion involves the dialectic between reality and truth, in the case of images and language. Our attention has focused on the tangible to such an extent that we no longer consider truth to carry any serious weight.

Reality deals with fixed things not open to discussion, things which one can only observe. It forces us to conform. Truth, like the word, is infinitely open-ended and invites reflection, response, relationship, and dialogue. Reality refuses to allow us the distance necessary so that we can be critical of what we are considering. In modern society we tend to accept truth only if it bears on reality -- specifically scientific reality -- which has become our ultimate truth."

In the same vein, we tend to believe words only if they have some visual evidence supporting them. Whatever cannot be expressed through images seems to us to have no genuine importance, or even existence.
Another reason for maintaining that *The Humiliation of the Word* is not primarily a negative book is Ellul’s repeated effort at synthesis. The dichotomy between word and image and between truth and reality is a temporary effect of the Fall, and contrary to God’s ultimate purpose for humankind. In the Incarnation and the consummation of God’s Kingdom, word and image are reconciled.

In what sense is language "humiliated," according to Ellul? His title alludes to a book written during 1939 and 1940 by the novelist and polemicist Georges Bernanos, but not published until 1949: *Les Enfants humiliés* (Paris: Gallimard). Bernanos deplores the fact that promises made to those involved in World War I were broken, leading to a second conflagration. In Ellul’s book the problem is not broken promises but rather a broken humanity. He does not attack images in themselves so much as the imperialism of images and our idolatrous prostration before them.

For several years Ellul led public discussions of significant films in his native Bordeaux. Such activity makes it clear that he is not flatly opposed to proper use of images. But images tend to neutralize the effects of the word, which becomes a sort of optional "footnote" to the dominant images. In this sense the word is continually humiliated in our society.

Never have I seen such a strange tragedy as Jean Racine’s *Phèdre* (1677), performed by a French troupe in 1975 for an American audience. I was astounded at how the words seemed to have lost all value and meaning. The actions dominated utterly, usually having no relationship whatever with the words, which were mouthed quickly, without expression. I was stunned. The play’s meaning was utterly distorted, not to say lost. A professor friend’s response to my distress was: "This is the only way Racine can be presented in our day."

In the book you are holding, Jacques Ellul has enabled me to understand the enigma of *Phèdre* divorced from its text. In the process, Ellul clarifies many other puzzling tendencies in modern society. Until I read *The Humiliation of the Word*, for instance, I could not understand why my students in French literature classes had so much to say and ask about the texts they read but never had any verbal response whatever when I showed them a film.

Language is further humiliated by intellectuals, especially certain structuralists, whose attacks on language that communicates meaning and whose preference for the "pure" language of the insane appear to have triggered the writing of this book.

Most of us now think essentially by association of images, Ellul believes, and can no longer construct or follow a rigorous logical demonstration, unless this is supported by charts and diagrams. As schools increase their reliance on images, educational levels decrease, indicating that images are not the panacea we presume them to be.

In theological terms, God’s choice of language as the basis of his contact with humanity
signifies that we are free to respond -- or to ignore him if we choose. Reliance on images eliminates the freedom that is essential to us if we are to respond to God.

Some of Ellul’s sociological books include brief but clear statements of his Christian hope (Changer de révolution) or veiled references to the Christian faith as the only conceivable way out of the tunnel his books describe (Autopsy of Revolution, The New Demons). But The Humiliation of the Word is the first book in which Ellul has intertwined major theological sections with his sociological analysis.

It is impossible to say whether this book is predominantly theological or sociological. In Ellul’s latest list of books (at the end of La Subversion du christianisme), The Humiliation of the Word appears in the sociological category, presumably at Ellul’s request. But the work is filled with theological reflection and exegesis of biblical texts (Ex. 32, Isa. 6, John’s Gospel, etc.). In a thematic study, Ellul tries to show that there are no genuine theophanies in the Bible. According to the author, the modern world’s preference for images stems from the fourteenth century, when the Church chose to favor them in preference to the word.

The combination of sociological and theological reflections in this book enables each discipline to hammer away at and refine the other. Thus rejection of words in favor of action on the sociological plane is related to the Hebrew concept (dabar), which combines words and action.

Ellul returns repeatedly to the theme of language as our human distinctive. If we use it thoughtlessly or devalue it in any way, we also devalue God, who chose it for his communication with us, and ourselves. We become less human when we opt for images rather than the word. The theological implications of Ellul’s sociological arguments are manifold. Clearly, the Church must not lean toward visual methods or attractions. Over-reliance on lavish liturgy or spectacle (common both to liturgical churches and modern evangelistic campaigns) constitutes a radical distortion of the Christian message. Ellul could have chosen to write a sociological treatise on language and paired it with a later theological work, as he has previously done (The Meaning of the City explores the theological implications of The Technological Society; The Politics of God and the Politics of Man is the biblical and theological counterpart of The Political Illusion). But in The Humiliation of the Word the author has preferred to integrate sociology and theology into a single whole, for reasons he has not yet explained in print.

I believe it is because of the confrontation of the two disciplines in this work that Costa Rican graduate students have responded to it more thoughtfully than to some of Ellul’s other books. Seeing the sociological realities that motivate the author’s theology helps us grasp his emphases. And understanding how theology can respond to sociological problems enables us to view the future with hope, as Ellul does. As always, however, in Ellul’s thought, this hope is coupled with realism and a spur to thoughtful action.

For twenty years I have worked in the Third World, where the problems Ellul presents in this book have even graver consequences than in North America. Here we are daily
bombarded with foreign images that crowd out local, "inferior," images and trample on local culture. Even worse, what you merely see on your television screen is reality here. You can cheer or be indifferent when you see the bullet hit its target, but for us the pain and death are not "pretend." If Christian churches are ever to become a prophetic voice they must give serious attention to the fundamental issues Ellul raises in this book as well as in his previous works on propaganda in technological societies. We realize that "the eyes of the world are upon us," but is anybody really listening?

Joyce Main Hanks
University of Costa Rica

Note: Except where otherwise indicated, the Revised Standard Version is the basis for biblical quotations when accompanied by a concrete reference to book, chapter, and verse. The major exceptions to this are indicated by the letters "JE," which signify my own translation of Ellul’s biblical quotation. He uses various French Bibles and sometimes his own translations and paraphrases. I have made no attempt to distinguish his source.