

Christian commitment, because there is something wrong. It's inevitable. If each of us doesn't choose obedience, Christians are just going to be homogenized and blended into the culture and become just part of the act. John Wesley once wrote that making an open stand against all ungodliness and unrighteousness is one of the noblest ways of confessing Christ.

Be radical. Dare to be different. Dare to be Christian. Go to the world. Accept Jesus Christ, and live for him in this affluent culture. I dare you to do it. There isn't anything else; believe me. I've tried it all. There is nothing else. And be determined in your own minds that whatever you're going to do, you are going to pursue it to the glory of God and make it different for him in an age that glories in what the Scriptures call sin. So gird your minds for action. Keep sober in spirit. Fix your hopes completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children do not be conformed to the former lust which was yours in ignorance, but be like the Holy One who calls you. Be holy yourselves in all your behavior. It is written, "You shall be holy because I am holy." Let it be your choice to live that radical message in the world today.

From a commencement address at Taylor University, May 18, 1985.

Jacques Ellul

Law and History Professor, Theologian

During World War II he was an active member of the French Underground Resistance and later served with distinction as Mayor of Bordeaux. In 1946 he joined the faculty of the University of Bordeaux. He has been highly honored by the French government and the French Academy. He is a prolific scholarly and Christian writer, and he is considered a foremost Christian thinker. He is a member of the Reformed Church.

I have few illusions on the subject on which I am going to write. Experience has taught me that the wisdom of the "ancients" is no longer heeded by the young. Yet it may be that the new generation will be different from the one that preceded it. Perhaps, like past generations, young people will once again be ready to hear the word of experience and the counsel of the past! In my opinion, there are four propositions, suggestions, observations to be considered, but I do not presume to exhaust all that could be useful to a young person today.

My first fundamental observation, decisive for all the others, is that of cultivating a critical spirit. Do not be negative, but always be alert, have your eyes constantly open, and know that no proposition, no

program, no philosophy, no religion should be accepted without being first subjected to scrutiny. Therefore, we must begin by saying, "No," not as a refusal to hear or examine things, but as a refusal to adhere to beliefs without having first understood, examined, evaluated, and judged them on the basis of knowledge and experience. A critical spirit always rejects what is fashionable. Listening to a certain type of music or wearing certain clothes, because everyone does it, represents weakness and resignation. One must begin by analyzing and knowing where something will lead, and what it involves. One must be a nonconformist in large and small things (but let us keep in mind that in our relationships with society there are no small things—it is as much a mistake to drink a soda without thinking about what we are doing as it is to vote republican or democrat). I must be nonconformist not to shock my friends, not to act superior to them, but because it is the only way to become myself. It is therefore necessary to keep a cool head, that is, never to allow oneself to be overtaken by unreflected passion, be it political, social, artistic, or collective. I must consider first what is involved and then, if the cause is good, give myself wholeheartedly to it, with complete enthusiasm, once the initial seduction has left, once it is finished and scrutinized. It is not sufficient to obey the evidence. No "evidence" should make us act: We must analyze what is evident and bring it to the realm of the comprehensible and the living. In giving this counsel I draw inspiration

from biblical texts as well: Paul in the Epistle to the Romans tells us: "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (12:1-3). On the other side of the issue of testing the evidence is the text concerning the temptation of Eve. After the serpent had shown her the tree of knowledge of Good and Evil, Eve "saw with evidence" that the fruit of this tree was good to eat, pleasant to the sight, and useful for opening the mind! If she had had a critical spirit, she would have first considered *who* was suggesting that to her, *why* he was doing so, and especially *what* he was ultimately by proposing to her (to become like God), and then she would have refused in spite of the evidence!

Coming immediately after the critical spirit, I recommend the application of a principle that I formulated more than twenty years ago, which subsequently spread around: It is necessary to "think globally and to act locally," which is just the opposite of what is generally done! Often we do not try to think globally because it is long and difficult, and it seems useless. On the other hand, when we "act globally" we will say that it is pointless to help a poor man who is hungry and that what is needed is to change the political and economic systems that produce the poor! Thus we give no attention to the need at hand, being absorbed only with endeavors far removed in time and space. In the realm of reflection, knowledge, and thinking we are content with the commonplace, with information from the media, with social trends. We

should proceed in exactly the opposite direction. We must think on our own, trying to make an original effort at getting the information by placing the question in its economic, historical, and other contexts. This will show us that large global undertakings are deceiving and illusory. If you wish to act on poverty, begin by helping the poor that you meet. As for the poor of the Third World, begin by informing yourself about their needs, about the possibility of getting them suitable help, but you must consider the negative effects of many humanitarian actions. All this is not to get you discouraged, but to avoid living with illusions and falling in the traps open to you. The same holds true for ecological actions. Focus on your action, your country, your city, your landscape, not on great projects, which are quickly politicized. But conversely, try to know *perfectly well* the true causes of pollution, the true dangers to be avoided, without contenting yourself with slogans. A global perspective is one that refuses ahead of time to adhere to programs, and that puts into relationship the spiritual and the economic, the social or the political. For, humanity is a *whole*, which must not be divided and which assumes that all aspects that concern humanity must be considered. Finally, the great political transformations always began with general, global thinking, which at the inception was expressed in individual actions. The great defect of current political or social movements is that they are launched with tremendous resources and large human

gatherings, but without any true founding principle.

The third piece of advice that I would offer is two-fold and derives from what I have just said. Its first aspect is that we must not believe in political action and in the possibility of truly changing something by way of politics! In our world, the latter is a false pretense. Politicians in general obey the “force of circumstances.” Global technological and economic systems are so powerful that nothing can be changed through political means. The politician in every country is an actor who occupies the foreground of the stage and attracts the attention of the crowds while serious things occur behind his back without the citizens’ being able to really see what is going on. It is more important to try to change a certain social relationship, or even more important, the spiritual life of humanity. Politics has no effectiveness whatsoever and its rule is over. It can, of course, modify the interest rate or a police order, but it can neither stop the course of armaments, nor modify the state of the Third World, nor really help those who are poor. Concrete problems have to be approached from a more profound level than politics, that is, the spiritual being of humanity. Yet there is a contradiction between the two orientations, for there is no “Christian politics” conceivable or achievable.

The other side of this reflection or meditation concerns the poor. The young—young Christians especially—feel inclined to help the poor, to take the side of the poor. But here again serious reflection must

be given, and the question must be asked: Who are really poor? The answer appears to be evident, yet it is not! The poor in contemporary society are undoubtedly still the ones who are hungry, stripped, and dispossessed of their goods, but very often when we are told of the poor located thousands of miles from us, it is a trap and a false pretense. For there are other poor who eat to their satisfaction and lack for nothing but are in fact poor. They are poor because they are threatened by powerful neighbors or isolated in the world. This is very important and counts a great deal today in the political judgments that we make. We take sides with those who are obviously poor. But such a question has to be envisioned *globally*. When we take sides we have to know exactly why and with justifiable reasons. We must not be swept away by our passions!

Finally, the last counsel that I would give is to keep contact with the past! Our society pretends that it is oriented toward the future. Only scientific and technical training really counts because that is what prepares us to enter a society of the future. But I believe that this is a grave error. A civilization, a culture exists only as a product of history; it is a slow creation, produced by many generations. A culture is not invented like a new motor! But without civilization, we will return to a primitive state even if we are brilliant engineers. In order to belong to a civilization, it is necessary to know the foundation of that civilization, its morality, its myths, and its history,

that is to say its past. We must not assume that we can invent a "technical culture" as some claim to be doing. There is no technical culture because culture cannot be fabricated voluntarily or willfully in a few years. It is a complex whole that a people build upon through successive generations. And I believe that technology with its constant change, its incessant "progress," is not able to be assimilated by a culture, and is incapable of producing one. If we want to be civilized and not barbarous, we must enter into the history of one's nation, into its practices developed over the course of time, into a certain morality, a certain type of human relations. Of course, this reference to the past, this grounding or rooting into the past does not imply a rejection of the future and the changing of society! Quite the contrary! But it implies that one does not accept just any type of future, that one *judges* progress and tries to build civilization on the efforts of past generations by studying their motivations. There is no more absurd formula than *tabula rasa*: "Let us start with a clean slate," for this is impossible. Even when we flatly reject the past, we always end up being reclaimed by it. We cannot get rid of our historical past any more than an individual can get rid of chromosomes. The new cannot emerge and survive unless it is grounded in the past. Two possibilities are then open to us. We can refuse to take the past into consideration, hence a crisis will appear in the course of which all new developments will be destroyed, and the past will reappear more "savage" than before.

However, an alternative remains open to us: We can choose to remain grounded in the past of this civilization, and the innovations that we undertake will have all the necessary chances for success. To know history well is the best means of preparing innovations for integration into the culture.

Translated by Maria Mocuta, Foreign Language Department, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois 60187.

Colleen Townsend Evans

Churchwoman, Writer

She is the author of eight best-selling books on Christian living. Her life and ministry with her husband, the Reverend Louis Evans, Jr. of the National Presbyterian Church in Washington is characterized by untiring service to the poor. She serves on boards of international organizations for world needs. In 1986 she was named Religious Heritage of America Churchwoman of the Year.

My soul does not find itself unless it acts. Therefore it must act." As an almost hopeless activist I naturally resonate to these words of Thomas Merton.

The issues that most concern me—hunger, urban problems, the suffering people of our world—determine the focus of my activities. However, in recent years I have been made freshly aware that my soul needs more than activity, and must not project itself entirely in the outward direction. "The soul that throws itself outdoors in order to find itself in the effects of its own work is like a fire that has no desire to burn but seeks only to go up in smoke" (*No Man Is an Island*, Thomas Merton). The *doing* is necessary, as I see it, but the *being* is absolutely crucial, and being