

The Theology of Helmut Thielicke

Colleagues,

Some of you know that Helmut Thielicke was my “Doktor-vater” (=major mentor for the degree) at the University of Hamburg 50 years ago. Although Marie and I have now moved into our “old folks home” (Hidden Lake!), we’re still downsizing what we didn’t get downsized at the old place. Mostly filing cabinets. One batch of file folders that showed up carries the label “Helmut Thielicke.” And in that batch I found my (completely forgotten) presentation from 1969 on Thielicke. I also no longer remember who the intended audience was. Ergo, now in 2011–42 years later—you are! Here it is.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Introduction to the Theology of Helmut Thielicke

Helmut Thielicke is 61 years old. [He died at age 77 in March 1986.] Thus he was in his early twenties when Hitler came to power in his native Germany. Like many other theologians of Germany between the two world wars, his magnificent obsession was focused on proclamation, on connecting the Christian message with the obviously different “modern” man of the 20th century. This is clearly reflected in his writing and speaking career, especially in his preaching for the past 15 years to SRO audiences in Hamburg’s St. Michael’s [today’s saint!] church with its 3000 seats.

Thielicke's two major works written while he was still in his twenties addressed themselves to the problem of history (Geschichte und Existenz—history and existence) and to the impact of the Enlightenment (Vernunft und Offenbarung—reason and revelation) in shaping modern man. This latter work was an investigation of Lessing's philosophy of religion. In many of Thielicke's subsequent works Lessing is a central figure. He is paradigmatic for the modern mind. He raises the question of authority. The truths of reason come with their own self-confirmation; but the historical truths of Christian revelation are not so, or at least are no longer so. These historical truths (God's actions with Israel, the words and works of Jesus) are conveyed to us via historical reports. The events may well have had convincing power for the people present at the time, who experienced them existentially, so to speak, but they do not have convincing power for me today when all I have is a report of the power event. Thus Lessing concludes, speaking for every post-enlightenment man: Historical truths can never have the convincing power that truths of reason have.

Lessing is willing to be “convinced” of the truth of Christian proclamation, to bow to it if he can do so with integrity, i.e., without surrendering his own existence and freedom. But such obedience is possible only at the court competent in matters of conviction, namely, the court of reason and conscience. Any obedience which bypasses this court violates the authority of God (Lessing had no trouble being a theist. It was the particularities of Christian revelation that gave him trouble.) and violates the existence of the human self, and is thus unworthy of credence.

Thielicke deciphers in Lessing's book, *Education of the Human Race* (Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts), a valid insight into the movement of human history. Historical evolution does produce new forms of human self-consciousness. The Enlightenment was

such a qualitative (and not merely quantitative) shift. As Lessing portrays it, it is the movement of the human race from the realm of myth and revelation to the age of reason characteristic of the unfolding enlightenment era. As God accommodated himself in the past to the mythic self-consciousness of man, he is to be expected to accommodate himself to the non-mythic rational self-consciousness of the man of the Enlightenment. But that makes the problem of preaching even more acute. How can the word of God be proclaimed as an event that confronts us from the outside, when the possibility exists for man to produce its effects himself (be a moral man, responsible, loving, etc.), even if he initially needed some sort of revelation to catalyze him into producing his own religion?

In Thielicke's later works another key figure moves in to share the limelight with Lessing in the shift of the self-awareness of modern man. That figure is Descartes. Descartes' famed motto: cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am), places the thinking subject in the center of the stage. In Thielicke's dogmatics (Vol. I, 1968) he shows how the Cartesian concern for the thinking subject has shaped western life and thought since that time and that it cannot be rolled back. No Christian understanding of history should ever try to do so. The Cartesian shift from knowledge of truth "out there" in the known object to knowledge of the knower (the subject of the knowing act) has brought about the following consequences for Christian proclamation and theology. It has led theologians to concentrate on the act of man's understanding and his appropriating the Christian message. From Schleiermacher in the 19th century to Bultmann and Tillich and the secular theologians of the twentieth, this concern has dominated the theological market place. It thinks of man as one "come of age," emancipated from old "alien" authorities for his knowledge and convictions, and

opens its conversation with this man in typical Cartesian fashion, viz., by engaging him in an analysis of his own existence. When such theology seeks to get its Christian message across to this man, it finds itself compelled to wrestle with the knotty problems of hermeneutics, the how-question of interpreting the Christian message so that it will be understood and appropriated by this Cartesian man.

Thielicke is critical of this way of doing theology and preaching in the face of modern Cartesian man. He insists that he registers this criticism not because he is a conservative and the Cartesian theological types are too radical, but because the Christian message itself suggests something else is going on when God's creative word encounters a man, ANY man pre- or post-Cartesian. Here is how he specifies the non-Cartesian theology even when it is addressed to modern Cartesian men:

“The content of the proclamation is God's spirit-filled creative action-word (Tatwort), which does not merely open itself up to the hearer, but rather creates its own hearer, as it produces in him an ‘Existence-in-the-Truth’ (Sein in der Wahrheit) (John 18:37). Thus it is this proclamation, pregnant with this content, and not the theology that grows out of it, which constitutes the medium of the Spirit and his creative working. Theology is one sort of reaction flowing from one whose existence has been struck by that word. It describes reflexively the grounds and content of the certainty that has been thus appropriated, ALREADY appropriated.”

Thielicke would not say that proclamation can ignore the current self-awareness(es) of man, but that proclamation is not intent on having this man appropriate the message with the self-awareness he brings. For the Christian message alerts the proclaimer himself to the awareness that whatever the self-

awareness of modern man may be, he, the proclaimer, anticipates that it will be the self-awareness of a sinner, regardless of the form (mythic, rational, secular) that this self-awareness takes.

“Thus we point out in the name of a non-Cartesian theology that God’s word is not at all appropriated by the given status of a man’s existence. For the Word recreates, via the Spirit’s wonder-working, the old creature and thus achieves with its own resources the conditions under which it is heard and accepted. It is Action-word. We do not pull God and his word into our existence; rather we encounter ourselves in the process of rebirth and are drawn into God’s history. Here our self is not (as in Cartesian theology) an identity within which nothing more than variations of our self-awareness occur. Instead this identity of the self can only be grasped dialectically: I live, and yet it is not I, but Christ lives in me.”

The word of God (revelation), the man of faith (Sein in der Wahrheit), and the current shape of man at this point in history in his world (man and the world between the fall into sin and judgment day) – these are the three base points for Thielicke as he does his theology and preaching. As specified above, the distinction between theology and preaching are not to be drawn categorically, but mutually interactively. For ultimately both are in the service of the same Lord, in two different modes of servanthood.

These three base points are clearly seen in the huge four-volume ethics (3000-plus pages) Thielicke has completed – curiously enough done before his dogmatics, reversing the tradition of the entire fraternity of German systematic theologians.

Thielicke says that he started with ethics first because the times called out for it. The times called out for a doctrine of

man and of the world. Thus for Thielicke the theme of Christian ethics is really Christian anthropology: Man and his being-in-the-world.

What follows is a condensation of his preface to the American edition of the ethics: "I did not want to write a book of morals, what the Christian must DO. That kind of legalism conflicts with the Gospel and the Reformation heritage of man's freedom when liberated by Christ. Liberation means that the Christian man now may do what previously he could not. He does not stand under a MUST when he stands under Christ's Lordship. But he does inquire concerning the will of that Lord for this his servant in this and that life situation. What he does is not a matter of indifference.

"Life lived out under the eyes and will of the Lord becomes a problem because of the reality in which that life has to be lived out. That reality limits and restricts me. I find reality already in operation with structures that seem to force my action into fixed channels. Take the business man, for example. In private life it is not too hard to perceive what I am to do in loving my neighbor when that neighbor is my spouse or my personal acquaintance. But what about the neighbor who is my business competitor? The structure of the economic world and its 'own indigenous laws-of-operation' [Eigengesetzlichkeit in German] contradict the rule of love which says consider only the neighbor's interest and not your own. Quite obviously the autonomy (Eigengesetzlichkeit) of business life has to be taken into account here. I will not be in business tomorrow if I sacrifice my all for my competitor today. So just what it would mean to be a loving business competitor will not be determined easily.

"Even if this example is overdrawn, it makes clear what I consider the true problem of ethics, viz., that man with his

existence is integrated into reality structures (often operating with their own Eigengesetzlichkeit) and that he has to work with these structures in his daily work and decisions. It is in the multi-faceted realm of the whole of reality (occupational, political, familial, social, economic life) where most people experience their real problems of conscience, their conflicts and personal difficulties.

“A book proposing to be theological ethics must do more than analyze these structures in terms of their own intrinsic Eigengesetzlichkeit. Theological ethics asks about the relation of these structures to God, and therewith to man as the creature of God. Reformation theology, which labeled these structures as “orders of creation,” did not develop the notion well enough to avoid distortion and mis-meaning. At least some strands of Reformation theology see these structures as permanent, given from the very first day of the creation. The fact of the world’s fallenness and man’s Babylonian heart (the heart depicted in the Tower of Babel episode) [N.B., whenever Thielicke uses the word Babylonian, he’s using it as it sounds in German, which recalls the Tower of Babel and not the ancient empire of Babylonia) are ignored by such a notion of the orders. The accent which I seek to add is to see the orders as God’s work in the creation in view of the fall and man’s Babylonian character. My preferred term is Notverordnungen (emergency ordinances) revealed in the so-called Noachic covenant, God’s commitment to Noah after the flood, instituting such structures as would preserve the already fallen creation from total annihilation. The Tower of Babel pericope is a word of God that depicts the functional procedures of “normal” man after the fall, and the necessity of such emergency measures for man’s own welfare and that of the fallen world as well. It also illuminated Babylonian man participating in shaping the structures of his own given world.

“I consider the doctrine of justification which Luther re-

discovered to be in fact the heart of theology. But just as in the heart of the individual believer this justified heart must now pump its blood into all the extremities of the believer's life (home, business, politics, etc.); so also this heart must pump blood into all segments of Christian theology. I seek to do this in the realm of ethics. What are the implications of justification by grace alone, freedom from the dominion of the Law, and the polarity of sin and grace for the existence of social intercourse, economic competition, labor-management relations, etc.? If the blood is not pumped out to these areas, Christians are in danger of succumbing to schizophrenia – in private life a believer living, as it were, supernaturally in a kind of superworld, but as a man of the world following the laws of the world.

“My aim in this interpretation of reality is to liberate Christian consciousness from this cleavage and to establish its unity. And not only Christians, but other thoughtful and reflective men as well. It is my intention to address this non-Christian audience by showing that the Christian message is not discussing issues in some other world, but in the real world in which the man of our age lives out his life. The word of God and faith as existence-in-the-truth speaks of the issues that are common to every man – life and death, marriage and the state, society and economics. The man of the world when alerted to this fact is forced to concede, ‘Here is someone speaking about my problems, about me; I must listen to what he has to say.’

“But this brings us back to the intersection of theology and preaching.

What is to be preached is the word of God, God's revelation. Yet that revelation is about the life of man in the world, in the web of the Eigengesetzlichkeiten, in the specific shape of his post-Cartesian self-consciousness. Our preaching is to interpret

the world of man, and therewith lay bare the theme which is of concern both to Christians and to secular men. Only thus can our message acquire a new worldliness. Only thus can there be a new incarnation of the Word which seeks out man in his earthly relationships.

“By showing how close Christian ethics is to Christian preaching I hope to have shown that ethics is not secondary, not the dessert after the main course. Christian faith is always the faith of living men, men who stand in the reality of this world and are subject to its constant pressures. The believer cannot believe ‘in’ God without believing ‘against’ the reality in which he finds himself, that reality which seems to be opposed to God and in face of which he must struggle through to the great ‘nevertheless’ of faith. For the demands which come from many of the orders of man’s daily life are such that he ‘falls’ precisely in fulfilling them. They draw him into disobeying God precisely by his giving himself to them, because they come to stand BETWEEN him and God. It may also be that several mandates individually contradict one another, so that the believer is involved in a conflict of values. For, after all, he lives out his faith precisely in this aeon between the fall and judgment day, in this world which is no longer whole, no longer transparent for God.

“Because this is so, the form of faith’s obedience in this aeon will seldom, if ever, be clear-cut and unequivocal. If one claims the opposite, he is only giving a variation of that righteousness by the Law which feeds on the illusion that man is capable of satisfying the claim of God. At the very point where obedience reaches its limit (e.g., when the crisis of conflicting mandates arises – ‘damned if I do, and damned if I don’t’), there the question of forgiveness arises and one moves beyond the question of how to be obedient in the crisis situation. For this crisis is an impasse which shows us that the

reality of this aeon, like our own Babylonian heart, can of itself produce no real righteousness. Hence there arises at this point the awareness that all our action stands in need of such forgiveness. Thus dogmatics and ethics are essentially saying the very same thing about one and the same theme. They have a common root in the doctrine of justification.”

Consequently Thielicke begins his ethics with an extended treatment of the “dogmatic” theme: justification. As the previous paragraph already hints, he anticipates that the discussion of any ethical issue, if that discussion builds on the three base points (revelation, faith, concrete reality of the actual situation), will eventuate in more than enlightened obedience. It will see this particular issue as a MODEL, a paradigm, of human existence between the fall and the judgment day, where the Eigengesetzlichkeit of the world’s structures are operational, where man’s Babylonian heart functions in ever new variations (Cartesian, non-Cartesian, and umpteen more possible variations as history continues to evolve), where even the man with the best of intentions and best of insight needs the word of forgiveness. He does not want to slip into a legalism which says that in such-and-such a situation, this is what a man of faith must do. Nor does he wish to spell out general principles and let each make his own application. The models are not illustrations of some general ethical principles Thielicke would try to get across. He says: “The function of these models is the substantive one of displaying in concrete detail the whole complicated web of reality, and of thus averting the danger that ethics will simply propound normative principles under which the individual cases are then presumably to be subsumed. Seldom if ever does a case from real life conform to any classical model of this or that ethical problem. Each case is its own complicated web of reality.

“The hardest thing about ethical decision is usually not to

muster up a readiness for obedience, but to decide what is in fact demanded, or in Christian terms, what the will of God IS in this specific case. For the norms are not usually so clear-cut and unambiguous – this points us to the theological background – that we can subsume this concrete case under them. On the contrary, they usually confront us as part of the web of conflicting norms among which we have to choose.

“Thus in my ethics the conflict situations, which other works on ethics often treat on the margins, are put at the center. The central ethical question: ‘What ought I do?’ can be dealt with only if a concrete but representative part of reality is analyzed in such detail as to make clear the complicated web of conflict. In my book these detailed analyses are then incorporated in turn into a theoretical systematic scheme. This conjoining of deductive and inductive methods is intended to prevent the ethics from falling apart aphoristically into a discontinuous series of individual cases, and also to assure that it will not become a mere system of hypothetical cases far removed from reality.

“In no sense does my ethics book tell one what to do in situation ‘x’. In the first place, the intention is to elicit individual decision, not to anticipate it but to provide, as it were, the materials for making it. Secondly, the aim is to shatter the illusion that there is an unequivocally ‘correct’ form of action which can be clearly delineated, as if there were such a thing as ‘RIGHTeousness.’ Attention is drawn instead to the form of the world in this aeon between fall and the judgment, which of itself cannot effect a fulfillment of the will of God in the sense of legal righteousness, and to the fact that the Sermon on the Mount is right when it eschatologically calls in question this world of ours. This points to the cosmological horizon of ethics, though not in the sense that the world becomes a constricting destiny of undeserved frictions in

which I am 'stuck' as an innocent victim, made guilty against my will. On the contrary, that world which cannot of itself produce righteousness is 'my' world; it is the objectification of my own Babylonian heart. That sentence has momentous consequences for theology's analysis of reality, especially for the examination of the orders and their Eigengesetzlichkeit."

To conclude: Thielicke not only uses models in his analysis of reality, but also enjoys using models at the other two base points (revelation and the man of faith). We have already heard him allude many times to the Babylonian heart of man which he sees exposed in model-form in the story of the Tower of Babel in the Old Testament. This model illuminates how fallen man in creating his world (its culture, its institutions, its "city-planning") is engaged in objectifying on the outside the interiority of his own Babylonian heart – both its greatness and its fateful flaw.

A favored model for both God's revelation and the man of faith in Thielicke's theology is the parable of the prodigal son. The key here is the Father's forgiveness for a son absolutely undeserving of forgiveness. The son's reception of that forgiveness moves him out of the alienation of the far country into the "truth-full" existence (Sein in der Wahrheit) of life in the Father's household. The older brother becomes a classic model of the Babylonian heart that refuses to live by forgiveness. In a sense he is still in the father's household, still even designated son by that father, but he is not transplanted by forgiveness into the "Sein in der Wahrheit." Thus the man of faith is no great hero; nor is the man of unfaith a patent "louse." The father patiently is awaiting both. In Jesus Christ he has concretized his loving Fatherly heart in the very midst of men with their Babylonian hearts and their Babylonian world, communicating in person: I am FOR you, not AGAINST you. It is possible to be in daily contact with God –

like the elder brother with the father in the parable – and still be more lost than the hell-raiser is. But the hell-raiser as well as the “good-boy” brother are still lost in the Babel of the far country until they come home into the forgiveness of the waiting Father. Living with that forgiveness, the true son goes out for daily work in the complicated world, that is indeed his FATHER’S WORLD.