

# Foreword

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**I**N 1959, the translator of *The Waiting Father* invited readers to sample what he considered “the greatest preaching being carried on anywhere in the world today.” For more than three decades thereafter, American readers agreed with that judgment by buying every book of sermons by Helmut Thielicke as translations became available in English. Thielicke was hailed as a model for preachers and as a celebrity in educated lay circles. Thirty-five titles, some of them written thirty years before, appeared almost annually between 1959 and 1990—a rate of better than one per year.

Thielicke’s introduction to the general public came through one man. John W. Doberstein was Professor of Practical Theology at the Lutheran School of Theology in Philadelphia. He had translated Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together* for Harper and Row in 1954, and the immense success of that book gave Doberstein a powerful voice at Harper. His familiarity with German theological literature had led him to Thielicke’s work, and he recognized how pertinent Thielicke’s sermons would be to the American scene. When Doberstein told his editor that Thielicke would fill a void in American religious life, the publisher took the risk—and realized the benefits.

The initial response to the *The Waiting Father* was so great that Doberstein had to translate additional material as fast as he could. Collections of sermons on the Lord’s Prayer, the creation accounts in Genesis, the sermon on the mount and other passages appeared in rapid order. Doberstein produced thirteen translations in seven years. In addition to Doberstein’s work for Harper, two other publishers began to cash in on the Thielicke boom by bringing out translations in 1962. In that year four new titles appeared, in addition to reprints of the earlier books.

Thielicke was pleased. He wrote to his friends that he was being translated by “the translator of Bonhoeffer,” which bode well for his readership in America and for his standing in Germany. He considered the relationship a

“special providence” and told his readers that he was “an author who had been elevated beyond himself by the translator” [*Ethics of Sex*, Harper, 1964, vii]. His relationship to Doberstein grew during the ensuing years through a constant correspondence over points of interpretation. Doberstein wanted to make Thielicke speak as relevantly to American audiences as he did to his fellow Germans, and that often meant that illustrations or references to current events had to be modified. The author and his translator became so well acquainted with one another’s thought that, when *The Trouble with the Church* was being translated in 1965, Thielicke suggested that Doberstein revise it by leaving out parts and rewriting others so that it would speak more specifically to the American scene. He offered to share the title page with Doberstein as co-author.

Doberstein died suddenly in 1965, just after beginning another translation. After him, other Lutherans took up the work, and Fortress Press, a Lutheran publisher, continued to bring out translations on a nearly annual basis. At the same time, the noted translator of Karl Barth, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, was producing a steady flow of translations for Eerdmans, a more conservative press. These works included Thielicke’s three volume systematics, *The Evangelical Faith*, which found a receptive readership among Eerdmans’ constituency. By the late 1970s other publishers of the evangelical wing began to translate or reprint material. Seen as a whole, this publication history demonstrates a gradual drift toward the more conservative end of the religious spectrum.

Even though his popularity among the general public did not begin until 1959, Thielicke had been known in American theological circles throughout the post-war period. Some faculty members at North American seminaries had emigrated from pre-war Germany because of Hitler’s efforts to eliminate opposing voices. These professors kept up with events in Germany after the war, including the latest theological discussions. For example, Paul Tillich of Union Seminary in New York, who had emigrated from Germany in 1933, reviewed Thielicke’s *Theological Ethics* in 1953, shortly after its appearance in Germany. Furthermore, these professors began to send students to Europe for graduate study. When the students returned, they looked for opportunities to bring their European professors to the United States for lectures and visits. Thielicke accepted such an invitation from Drew University in 1956. He also visited Union Seminary, Princeton Seminary, and Washington, D.C. It is clear that his contacts were confined to the theological circles that knew about his scholarly work.

Although articles by Thielicke had appeared in American periodicals for

a decade before the appearance of *The Waiting Father* in 1959, his earlier work received little attention. Just after the end of World War II he had written a brief and candid description of the religious situation in Germany for a special issue of the *Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science*. A few years later some Scottish and American theological journals translated essays in which he criticized the program of demythologization that had been introduced by Rudolf Bultmann. Beyond those brief glimpses, Americans had little opportunity to discover the growing body of theological work that Thieliicke was producing. His multi-volume *Theological Ethics* has been described as the most extensive systematic work of the twentieth century, except for Karl Barth's monumental *Church Dogmatics*. Through the 1950s he wrote travel journals, essays and monographs that became a rich vein for American publishers to mine after Thieliicke had become well-known on this side of the Atlantic.

It was Thieliicke's sermons that brought him—and the rest of his theological work—to fame in America. His popularity stemmed from his ability to meet a spiritual hunger among well-educated people who found the typical sermonic fare of the 1950s less than satisfying. Billy Graham's enormous appeal to mass audiences did not extend to many church members and academics who found his basis too simple. He spoke to those looking for a beginning in Christian faith. Other preachers of the 50s, like Norman Vincent Peale, preferred "positive thinking" to the biblical struggle with a mysterious God. Their sermons were topical, focussing on personal crises rather than opening up the world of the Bible. Thieliicke filled the void between revivalism and religious self-help. He aimed at the doubter, the marginal Christian. He then used a biblical text to explore some spiritual problem from a new perspective, frequently showing the larger social issues involved. Even when he preached on personal questions of faith and doubt, he grounded his exposition on a biblical passage—often a parable of Jesus. It was the same formula that had attracted audiences of up to three thousand Germans, from all segments of society, to the largest church in Hamburg whenever Professor Thieliicke preached.

Unquestionably the power of Thieliicke's preaching lay in his ability to take a biblical text, written thousands of years ago, and to show how that text could illuminate today's issues. That is not an easy task. It is complicated by the many differences that have arisen between the days of Abraham and Sarah and our own. Not only have the languages and cultures changed, but the concepts of earth and heaven, of weather and disease, politics and religion have changed as well. It is all very well to say the the basic "human

situation” is always the same, but in fact almost every aspect of that situation’s analysis, description and solution differs from the way it was treated in the Bible. The interpreter’s task is to understand both the present and the Bible so well that the two worlds will be able to communicate with each other. The basic issue of preaching for Thieliicke was to relate the “then and there” of biblical narrative with the “here and now” of contemporary society.

Thieliicke had wrestled with that question during the difficult years of preaching to the shell-shocked citizens of Stuttgart during the war. In those same years German theologians were discussing the proposal of Rudolf Bultmann that the biblical message needed to be restated in contemporary thought-forms. Bultmann argued that there were vital truths hidden in the language of a three-story universe, but that those ideas needed to be freed from their ancient wrappings; they must be “demythologized.” Then the timeless truths could be expressed in language more appropriate to modern society.

In a paper delivered at a pastors’ conference in 1941, Thieliicke agreed with Bultmann’s analysis of the problem, but he strongly opposed Bultmann’s solution. He argued that relying on contemporary philosophy would be a great mistake, because current philosophical systems, especially the existentialism that Bultmann employed, had lost the framework of transcendence; the universe was a closed system. To recast the biblical story in the contemporary worldview would be to lose the most important element of all: the action of God in history. The power of Nazi propaganda had been precisely its ability to bend the horizons of German intellectuals into a closed circle of thought. For the church to consider embracing a system that left no room for the judgment and historical action of God would be to risk further seduction.

The resurrection of Jesus, for example, remained absolutely essential as a basis for faith. It demonstrated the power of God to overcome every earthly system of oppression. It also showed that the crucified Jesus is an active power in history and not just an ancient example. To follow Bultmann’s reinterpretation of the resurrection as no more than a faith response of the believer would be to rob the church’s proclamation of its cutting edge against all human pretensions.

Because Thieliicke was an early critic of Bultmann’s program, he found sympathetic hearts among American conservatives. In the years following the war, Bultmann’s ideas crossed the Atlantic and became the catalyst for intense religious debate in the United States. Thieliicke’s critique of Bultmann followed the discussion to these shores. The intensity of the debate left little room for shades of gray, so any opponent of Bultmann was consid-

ered a friend of the conservative camp. Furthermore, Thielicke had published a sympathetic study of the English Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892), in which he commended Spurgeon for his direct and unapologetic presentation of biblical themes. These credentials gained him access to the ears of most American Protestants, who felt that Bultmann had indeed interpreted the heart out of the biblical message.

Thielicke realized that his early popularity in America rested on the fact that he was not well-known and that various theological camps judged him on the basis of meager evidence. He observed that

The liberals probably thought: He speaks in modern style, so he must be one of us; the Baptists said: He has written a book on Spurgeon, so he is close to us; the fundamentalists noted that my sermons were expositions of biblical texts and often included me in their ranks; and the Lutherans said: After all, he comes from Hamburg.

[*Between Heaven and Earth*, Harper's, 1965, xiv]

He liked the American conservative wing because he felt that its strong beliefs made it ready for serious discussion of basic religious issues. He did not agree with conservatives on all counts, but he conveyed his interest in continuing discussion rather than caricaturing or condemning them. They responded by coming to his lectures, inviting him to their seminaries, and publishing—and republishing—his books. His popularity among these fundamentalists and evangelicals lasted a decade longer than it did among more moderate and liberal theologians.

After his second visit to the United States in 1963 Thielicke published a book which re-created some of the dialogues he had held with American Christians. It is clear that his audiences wanted to press him further on his position regarding doctrines other than the resurrection, on which he had written so plainly. The tone of the questions was always polite—Thielicke remarked that, in contrast to German audiences, Americans always seemed ready to listen rather than being chronically skeptical. But the intent was to probe his views on matters like the inerrancy of the Bible, verbal inspiration, the Virgin Birth, and speaking in tongues. While complimenting his questioners on the directness of their inquiries, he carefully distinguished between doctrines that he considered essential, the resurrection for example, and doctrines he thought less central, such as the virgin birth of Jesus. He did not deny that Jesus could have been born of a virgin, but he pointed out what a slight role it played in the whole New Testament and suggested that it

might have been a pious way to describe the “otherness” of Jesus. In this way he established a position which did not match fundamentalism, but which affirmed miracles and generally suited groups which later would bear the label “evangelical.”

Fundamentalism remained a major concern of Thieliicke’s and in some respects it defined American Protestantism for him. He believed that the central issue facing the churches in the United States was how they would deal with the fundamentalists. He hoped that the strength of piety and conviction that the fundamentalists expressed would continue to infuse American religious life. He feared that those characteristics would be lost if fundamentalist voices were discredited or ignored. At the same time he urged the fundamentalists to realize that they were defending positions that were not central to faith—that in fact some of their rigidity might mask an inner mistrust of Christianity’s ability to face the modern world.

In a sense, Thieliicke brought the results of post-war German theology to America in an attractive package. For example, his greatest success, *The Waiting Father*, was basically an exposition of contemporary German biblical scholarship on the parables. Traditional preaching had found in the parable of the prodigal son a cautionary tale about the dangers of wasteful living, but German theologians were pointing out that the parables really focussed on God and the kingdom of God rather than on human nature. In the title sermon of *The Waiting Father* Thieliicke begins with the traditional emphasis on the psychology of the young man who wanted to get away from parental authority, but then he turns his hearers’ attention to the real point of the story: the patient love of the father who waited for the headstrong child to return. His use of examples from family life, business, contemporary authors and the youth culture led his audiences to feel that the parable really was describing their own situations. The fresh insight, however, came from the revelation that the parable was really about God’s love rather than about our weaknesses.

Thieliicke’s personal appearances in America were a curious blend of disappointment and delight. Persons who had read his work in translation flocked to churches where he was preaching in order to hear more of his eloquence. However, he preferred to speak in German with an English translator at his side, or to read from a prepared translation. In either case it was difficult for him to build the rhetorical structures and cadences that propelled his preaching in his native language. The wit and content were still there, but following one of his sermons resembled a mountain hike more than a stroll through some forest cathedral.

Despite the barriers of language, Thielicke's personal gifts established immediate rapport with those who met him. He was a large, expansive man, ready to laugh and intensely curious about everything new. His taste in music covered the range from Gregorian chant to jazz. He told hilarious stories—of his student days, of fascinating places he had visited, and of the celebrities he had met. His comfortable childhood had given him the gift of ease in distinguished company. Whether on a steamer or at a formal dinner, he spoke easily with strangers.

Often a conversation that began on the most casual level would deepen and intensify as he explored issues that his partner had not allowed to come fully to light. Then at the end of the day, as he jotted down notes in his journal, Thielicke would reflect on the conversation and examine its implications for Christian faith and life. Sooner or later, those reflections would add reality and relevance to a sermon or an essay.

Thielicke's ability to speak directly to the inner needs of his hearers came from a life that had felt many of those doubts and pressures. His academic career was plagued by a progressive illness that rendered him weak at times and finally became life-threatening. Hopes for the completion of his graduate work grew dim; it was all he could do to cling to life itself. Then, at the moment of deepest despair, he took an overdose of an experimental drug. His condition began to improve. Thus death became a reality to him, as did the possibility of miracle.

His training as a theologian brought him into contact with the principal theological lights of the 1930s. He heard lectures from—and dared to differ with—Karl Barth, the leading figure of Reformed theology in the first half of this century. He went on to study at Erlangen, a Lutheran stronghold, where he worked with Paul Althaus. Although he felt more at home in the Lutheran context, he did not fully agree with his mentors and began to chart an independent course.

The rise of National Socialism forced him to think through the relation of Christianity to culture in a very concrete way. Hitler's campaign against Christianity was subtle and cautious, but every year that passed drew the lines more clearly. At first it was merely "Heil Hitler" and other patriotic acts, then the law required faculty members to participate in "seminars" that forced them to declare their political views. Thielicke spoke out in those sessions, and soon his resistance to the party line became known in academic—and party—circles. In the late 1930s, as he tried to find a teaching position in the German university system, he discovered that he had enemies in high places. He was faced with that most fundamental question:

personal advancement or personal principle. Should he bend to the political “realities” in order to find a job and support his new bride, or should he refuse to join the Nazis and risk losing any chance for a professorship? In retrospect the choice seems stark and clear, but as he describes the unfolding situation one realizes how ambiguous each decision really was. Those difficult days gave him personal experience of the way ethical decisions are made in everyday life.

When his refusal to bow to party demands resulted in his dismissal from academic life, he became a part of German society in a new way. After a year of military service he took a parish and began a ministry to his countrymen as they lived through war, bombing, loss of family members, and the ultimate chaos of defeat. It was in these years of parish work that he became known for his preaching. From his pulpit in Stuttgart he addressed the whole spectrum of human fears and sorrows; his sermons quoted persons to whom he had ministered during the week, at gun emplacements, in hospitals, and in bombed-out homes. Audiences swelled into the thousands as people from all walks of life found that he understood their lives and their problems. This period of ministry set him apart from the academics of his time. It gave him the voice of authenticity that continued to ring through his preaching in the post-war years.

After the end of the war, Thielicke resumed his university career, first at Tübingen and then at the newly-founded University of Hamburg. He also had the opportunity to continue his preaching ministry, and many of the sermons later published in the United States had their origin in Saturday evening services at the church of St. Michael in Hamburg.

Ultimately, Thielicke’s success as a preacher brought about the confrontation that ended his sermon series. The student uprisings of the 1960s had their counterparts in Germany, where they took the form of attacks on the German university system. Thielicke did not approve of the radical agenda of the student reformers because it reminded him of the tactics used by the Nazis in his younger days. He publicly opposed the movement, just as he had opposed the Nazis. The students, in turn, targeted his preaching services as opportunities for gaining maximum attention from the media. In January of 1968 they attempted to disrupt a service and were thwarted when Thielicke led the congregation in lusty hymn-singing. Although Thielicke completed his 1968 preaching series, he did not continue the practice. Instead, he organized the Faith Information Project Group, an effort to use printed media as an outreach ministry to the unchurched.

In the United States, Thielicke’s reputation as a preacher continued to fuel



interest in almost everything he wrote. The “death of God” questions that were raised in the mid-60s stimulated concern for interpreting the core beliefs of Christianity to a secularized culture. Thieliicke’s work in Germany had taken that task very seriously, and so his writing continued to have appeal. As a result his books on theology, rather than his sermons, began to occupy the attention of American readers during the 1970s and 80s. Even his death in 1986 has not diminished the interest in his work and the flow of articles about him.

The following autobiography, written just two years before his death, will help American readers understand the powerful life experiences that shaped his understanding of God and of human society. It is a frank disclosure of the decisive events that molded him into one of the most noted of modern preachers, but at the same time it is an entertaining narrative of the small defeats and victories that make up the life of any human being.

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