

## *Translator's Introduction*

The addresses here presented in English dress represent in my judgment the greatest preaching being carried on anywhere in the world today. Paul Althaus once said that people today are not tired of preaching, but tired of *our* preaching; and the response to Helmut Thielicke's preaching bears this out.

Here is a university professor, steeped in the lore and language of theology and philosophy, who nevertheless, because of his closeness to life and his passionate concern to communicate to men in real life, can draw, without benefit of public relations techniques and high-powered promotional build-up, thousands of people, young and old, men and women, sophisticated students and ordinary shopworkers, filling the largest church in non-churchgoing Hamburg (capacity four thousand) on Sundays and again during the week with a repetition of the same sermon. This is phenomenal, and the explanation for it, it seems to me, lies in this preacher's concern to speak the language of our day. His success is due not only to a great native gift of speech and imagination, but to the devoted, painstaking efforts he makes to translate his message into contemporary, colloquial terms. The native gift commands admiration, but the diligent effort is exemplary and is a challenge and a comfort to the ordinary preacher.

But vivid, pictorial, poetically perceptive power of speech is not the only excellence of these addresses. Their profoundly evangelical insight into the meaning of Jesus' simple, but frequently baffling, parables; the sensitive, empathetic knowledge of contemporary life which they betray, all the way from James Dean's movies, the plays of Sartre and Dürrenmatt (one of which recently opened on Broadway), the novels and poems of Bernanos, Brecht, and Benn, the philosophy of those mentors of our age, Pascal, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard, to the agonies of the beat and off-beat generation (nothing in this world is alien to this preacher!); but above all, their constant, personal, compelling address to the hearer and reader, whether he be the regular occupier of a pew, or the dweller on the fringes of the Christian fellowship, or the soul saturated in all the bitter juices of skepticism, secularism, and nihilism—all this, along with the gospel of God's judgment and grace drawn in a steady bead upon our real situation in this world and before God, this

is great preaching. This is "existential" preaching, in the Christian, Kierkegaardian sense of that much-abused word. Dr. Wilhelm Pauck, who shares my regard for these sermons, said to me recently, "There's a man who takes you by the scruff of the neck!"

The clue to Thieliicke's power as a preacher and a theologian lies in his constant concern to speak to modern man as a person in his peculiar predicament, and in this he may be compared with Schleiermacher in his "addresses on religion to its cultured despisers," though the comparison soon breaks down, for Thieliicke's message is far more solidly biblical and realistic than Schleiermacher's, and the modern "cultured despiser" has been leached in waters far more disintegrative than rationalistic skepticism. In 1934 Thieliicke published his dissertation on *History and Existence*, in which he dealt with the problem which ever since he has considered the central problem of life. As he says in his book, *Encounters*, an autobiographical essay, this is the problem of

how the vertical dimension of the revelatory event relates to the horizontal ranges of the life in which we live by nature, to the state, to culture, and to personal life. The question that always interested me most was whether and to what extent a whole new understanding of life comes to expression in the Christian faith. For me the leitmotiv became Luther's dictum, *Persona facit opera*, "It is the person that performs the works." In everything that man thinks, wills, and does, no matter in what province of his life, he is realizing himself. I was never interested in political, economic, and cultural programs and performances as such; but I have been extremely concerned with the question of what the person looks like who betrays, expresses, and realizes himself in all these areas. I cannot even see a movie or watch a tightrope dancer without asking myself what this person, who is here manifesting himself, really thinks of himself, and to what extent therefore all these things are fragments of a great confession. Correspondingly, I have then been interested in the theological question of what change takes place in a man, and naturally also in the forms in which he expresses himself, when he finds God and so also finds himself. For of one thing I was always sure, that when a man seeks himself, he fails to find himself, and that he gains and realizes himself only when he loses his life in God.

Helmut Thieliicke was born in Barmen in 1908. Following the German custom, he studied at a number of universities, Greifswald, Marburg, Erlangen, and Bonn. Upon recovering from a severe illness which was a turning point in his life, he completed his doctoral dissertation as an assistant at Erlangen. In 1936 he was called to a professorship at Heideiberg, where he taught until 1940, when he was summarily dismissed because of his bold criticisms of Nazi policies. The dismissal came just as he and his wife returned from their wedding trip and he was obliged even to return the month's salary check he had just

received. They were left destitute. The Nazi official in charge of university affairs gave the reason for his dismissal in these words: "As long as there are any faculties of theology left—and it won't be much longer, sir—I shall see to it that only sucking pigs and no wild boars are given professorships. But you belong to the younger generation of theologians who are pugnacious in their cause. We can't use these people. The old ones we'll soon wear down." For the rest of that year he served in the army. Returning to civilian status in 1941, he was ordained by Bishop Theophilus Wurm and became a pastor in Ravensburg, where he had his first real taste of preaching to a congregation. During this period he also made extensive lecture tours throughout the country until, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other fearless pastors and theologians, he was forbidden to travel or speak publicly. In 1942, again through the good offices of Bishop Wurm, he was called to Stuttgart, where he gave courses in theology for ministers and delivered popular lectures on Christianity which week after week attracted crowds of three thousand and more. This was in the midst of the bombing of the city by the Allied forces, and the meetings were moved from place to place as one auditorium after another was bombed out. After each address several hundreds of volunteer stenographers remained and took down dictated excerpts of the lectures, which they then duplicated privately. Printing was forbidden, but these copies of the Christian message, handed from person to person, found their way to thousands of eager readers. In June, 1944, at the request of Karl Goerdeler, leader of the German resistance to Hitler, he wrote for the proposed revolutionary proclamation the section on the new regime's attitude toward Christianity.

At the close of the war in 1945, Thielicke was called to the chair of systematic theology in Tübingen and in 1951–52 he served as rector of the university. From Tübingen he was called in 1954 to become the first dean of the newly founded faculty of theology in the University of Hamburg. In June, 1955, he was granted the honorary degree of Doctor of Theology by the University of Glasgow. (The address he delivered on that occasion was published in the *Expository Times* (LXVII, 154–157, 175–177) under the title, "Reflections on Bultmann's Hermeneutic.") In 1956 Dr. Thielicke was a guest professor at Drew University and lectured at Union Theological Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, the Chicago Federated Theological Faculty, and in Washington, D.C.

Thielicke's published output is prodigious in scope and erudition. There can be no question that he is one of the supreme Protestant theologians on the Continent today. The following is a partial list of his works with titles rendered into English, most of them now in their third and fourth German editions:

*The Relation between the Ethical and the Esthetic*, 1932; *History and Existence*, *Foundations of an Evangelical Theology of History*,

1934; *Reason and Revelation, A Study of Lessing's Philosophy of Religion*, 1936; *Between God and Satan, The Temptation of Jesus and the Temptability of Man*, 1938; *The Prayer that Spans the World, Addresses on the Lord's Prayer*, 1945; *Death and Life, Studies in Christian Anthropology*, 1945; *Questions Christianity Puts to the World, Studies on the Intellectual and Religious Crisis of the West*, 1947; *The Faith of Christianity, A Lay Dogmatics*, 1949; *The Theology of Anfechtung, Collected Essays*, 1949; *Nihilism, Its Nature, Form, and Conquest*, 1953; *Theological Ethics*, Vol. I, 1951, Vol. II, 1955; *Life Can Begin Again, A Passage Through the Sermon of the Mount*, 1956; *In America Everything Is Different, Encounters and Observations*, 1956; *Christian Responsibility in the Atomic Age*, 1957.

Of these the two volumes of *Theological Ethics* are of prime importance; the third volume, on the "theology of politics," has now appeared in Germany. An introductory section of his "Ethics" will be the next book of his to be published in English under the Harper imprint.

This present volume, entitled in German, "God's Picturebook," but given an English title which reflects the theme that runs throughout the addresses, constitutes a worthy and charming introduction to a great theologian and preacher whose appearance in English is long overdue. There is an Italian play on words which reads: *Traditore, traduttore*—translators, traducers. No translation ever quite escapes that accusation and all too many are libels upon the author. I have followed the old rule of translating "as literally as possible and as freely as necessary," keeping in mind what Luther said of his translation of the Pentateuch, "I endeavored to make Moses so German that no one would suspect he was a Jew." The challenge of making a highly original German stylist speak in idiomatic American has made the translation of these addresses a rewarding and memorable experience.

J. W. D.

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