One New Book For The Preacher

Post-Enlightenment Theology For Preaching

Richard A. Ray
First Presbyterian Church, Bristol, Tennessee

THE EVANGELICAL FAITH by Helmut Thielicke, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromley from *Der Evangelische Glaube.*

Volume One: *Prolegomena: The Relation of Theology to Modern Thought Forms,* William B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1974, 420 pp.
Volume Two: *The Doctrine of God and of Christ,* 1977, 476 pp.
Volume Three: *Theology of the Spirit,* 1982, 484 pp.

Preachers often feel the need for theologians who are deeply involved in the life of the church. Helmut Thielicke is one of these theologians. He is in fact, better known among readers in America for his earlier books of sermons than for his heavier works in theology and ethics. As Dean of the Theological Faculty and Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Hamburg, Germany, he has become an articulate spokesman for a neo-Reformation theology which preserves its integrity in the midst of the changing movements which have characterized contemporary theology since Brunner and Barth. He is thus of genuine concern for all who are involved in preaching. The question which is posed by the publication of his doctrinal *magnum opus* is whether a classical theology with its roots in the patristic period and the Reformation can speak with a compelling vitality in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Or, on the contrary, will its voice be so soft that it will only compel the attention of other professional theologians?

This is a very complex work. I read each volume repeatedly and then stepped back from them for a time to gain more perspective. In the intervening period I had occasion to review some of the earlier sources referred to by Thielicke. Nevertheless, it remained a challenging project. Thielicke's intellectual concerns do not easily mesh with the preoccupations of recent Anglo-American theology. Further, the basis of Thielicke's sermons in this theology is not easily perceived.

With regard to style, *The Evangelical Faith* is not as clear as the earlier works. Those who have read his other books have usually been won by the unique flair with which Thielicke has been able to reinterpret Reformation Theology from the perspective of current Biblical scholarship. What is of particular interest to preachers is that he has produced homiletically inviting images and ideas. He spoke as Luther would have spoken if he had passed the final exams at Marburg and Tübingen in the mid-twentieth century. In addition, like his great predecessor of the enlightenment, Friedrich Schleiermacher,

Thielicke understands with remarkable penetration many of the individual and social problems of his time. All of this has enabled him to present the gospel message to very sophisticated audiences. He can preach to those who are aware of that sense of displacement and isolation which has characterized much urban culture since World War II. Thus, in spite of stylistic problems and obscurities, one is drawn to these volumes.

It is important to see the overarching scope of *The Evangelical Faith.* The opening chapters of the first volume lead into a highly informed analysis of the ways in which the Reformation principles were reinterpreted or ignored in the succeeding centuries. Thielicke conducts us through a critical examination of intellectual history from the perspectives of Chalcedonian and Reformation Theology. He explores a clearly defined section of the history of ideas, a history of culture, which focuses intensely upon university oriented intellectual developments. The persistent problem that Thielicke uncovers is the anthropocentrism of the rising philosophic culture. Theology has gone awry in its anthropocentric preconceptions ever since the Reformation.

How is this relevant for preachers today? It is relevant because Thielicke intends to lead us out of these preconceptions. He picks up the thread in the eighteenth century, for it is the beginning of that century that René Descartes gave expression to a telling revolution in Western thought.

Thanks to the benefit of his late father's estate, Descartes was able to withdraw from the conventional obligations of middle class life. Proceeding to read "The Book of the World" in pursuit of a new understanding of truth, Descartes eventually came to the rational analysis of his own thought processes which is expressed in his *Cogito Ergo Sum.* At this place, Descartes initiated, as Thielicke puts it, "all the movements in which find their point of departure in the 'I,' in the subject of experience and understanding." Thielicke adds, "The way is thus prepared for that reflection on the I, its situation, preconceptions, and self-understanding, which Descartes initiated and which constantly gained in strength" (Volume I, pp. 34 f.). This is not the place to raise the question as to how much of this development can really be laid at the feet of Descartes. It is important, however, to observe for the purpose of Thielicke's thesis that he is so convinced of Descartes' role in giving shape to this self-focused viewpoint that he prefers to use the term "Cartesian" rather than "modern" for this perspective. This unprecedented concentration upon the act of understanding and appropriation itself is thus "Cartesian." For Thielicke, the critical problem becomes the degree to which this concentration on the act of knowing in itself influences the content of that which is known in faith. As he puts it . . . "the crucial question of Cartesian theology comes to light, namely, whether it will be content simply to indicate the place of doctrines in our consciousness, whether it will not surreptitiously attempt something more and very different, whether it will not secretly make this consciousness the norm and criterion of what doctrines can be assimulated." This is a very direct challenge to the popular forms of inductive preaching which frequently surround us today.

Thielicke's identification of the modern predicament concerning the role of consciousness in theological method serves as the prolegomena to the re-

maining volumes. While it is not entirely original, his analysis raises the question of the whole cultural norm. Is there something in the foundations of modern Western culture which is now antithetic to the Christian gospel? There may be unresolved historical problems in assigning this influence so fully to Descartes, but the significance of the issue itself is without question. In this sense Descartes can legitimately provide the occasion for placing the critical definition in the opening pages of the first volume. The significant role of consciousness and the question of its own structures and processes has been woven through much art and culture since the beginning of the eighteenth century. In the field of theological studies, Schleiermacher made it an unprecedented concern in his *On Religion* and *The Christian Faith* and in the twentieth century it has reappeared as an underlying philosophical issue in theologians as diverse as Bultmann, Hartshorne, Wieman, and Ricoeur. It is, of course, preeminent in Tillich's thought as well as in other formulations of existentialist theology. And is it also appearing in some Western preaching of liberation theology?

In his restatement of the Christian faith, Thielicke begins with the question of the central place of consciousness in contemporary, "Cartesian" thought. He then moves on in Volume Two toward a redefinition of the concept of revelation itself. Revelation is best understood as neither a completely supernatural invasion from beyond the world nor an entirely eminent enhancement of that which already lies within nature. Christian revelation is unique. Holding more in common with Barth's revolution against natural theology than with Tillich's method of correlation, Thielicke places the first emphasis in revelation on God's own distinctive self-revelation to human receptivity. This becomes the foundational principle in *The Evangelical Faith,* involving the sense of personalism which appears in Brunner as well as the emphasis on God's authoritative revelation which is in Barth. Integrated with this is a focus on the personal relationship which will remain as one of the distinctive ingredients in Thielicke's understanding. According to Thielicke, God's self-revelation stimulates faith as "an affirmation against appearance, against experience, against the trend of natural knowledge . . ." (Volume II, p. 51). Faith is thus dependent for its coherence and vitality neither upon nature nor upon human responsiveness and subjectivity. It is instead an integral part of a new or non-Cartesian mode of knowledge.

It is important for us to recognize that Thielicke intends to eclipse entirely the problems associated with classical theism that have reappeared regularly in Christian preaching. His basis for doing this is the conviction that God's self-revelation is far more radical than the traditional theological and homiletical formulas. Its power and mystery exceed even such basic doctrinal formulations as the Trinity. When we understand such concepts in the right perspective, we see that they serve best in safeguarding the majesty of the God who himself transcends all the doctrinal modes and forms of his own movement outward (Volume II, p. 135). With this principle in hand, Thielicke then mows down the ranks of European theologians, including such figures as Lessing and Van Ruler. In reviewing their relationships to this principle of God's self-revelation, he covers in the process such concepts as law and gospel, covenant theology, salvation history, and the important category of the new and radical obedience

of the Christian. Throughout this discussion it is Thielicke's purpose to maintain his conviction that the gospel is the "supreme kindness" (Volume II, p. 233). God has bestowed this kindness upon us as he has revealed the immediacy of his heart in Jesus Christ.

The fulcrum upon which all these themes are balanced is Thielicke's urgent concern for the centrality of Christ in theology and in preaching. It is in Christ that God gives definitive form to his self-revelation. The distinctiveness of Thielicke's theology is his concern to allow the peculiar qualities of God's self-revelation in Christ to be definitive. In the scope of this process, God himself gives new definition to the concerns which we have regarding consciousness and awareness. Thus it is not "modern man in search of a soul" who ultimately shapes our concerns about ourselves but the God who is the redeemer in Jesus Christ. It is thus this emphasis on God's definitive self-revelation which gives Thielicke's theology its identity as "evangelical" in the historic European sense of the term.

While systematic theology is being approached from a wide array of directions, Thielicke's approach is distinctively valuable for preachers because it focuses on epistemological concerns. He attempts by historical and theological analysis to work out a persuasive apologetic for a Biblical understanding of Christian knowledge. His work thus endeavors to build bridges from the gospel to the contemporary problems of the preacher. A fundamental virtue of his approach is that he does not become consumed by epistomological problems but that he even attempts to transcend them. Thus, in the course of the entire work he gradually leaves the discussion of the Cartesian problem behind and does not really remain in serious dialogue with it. This does raise structural questions about relationships among the volumes, for it may never be possible for us to transcend this contemporary perspective completely in any area of theology or homiletics.

Moving from the traditional distinctions between Alexandrian (deductive) and Antiochene (inductive) theology, Thielicke emphasizes the role of obedience to the will of God as the key which opens up Christology for today's preaching. Obedience to God's will becomes the critical response which makes possible our access to the true knowledge of Christ. He thus uses it in place of the classical concept of analogy. God's self-revelation in Christ and the obedience to the will of God that ensues points us toward the transformation "into the new creature which banishes all old things including the old consciousness" (Volume II, p. 289). Volition is thus a pivotal epistemological and soteriological issue, reflecting Thielicke's indebtedness to Augustine. From this basis Thielicke continues to work out the implications of the transcendent revelation, holding that while Christ's sonship is historical it also transcends history and objectification. This transcendent authority is manifest in the traditional Christological issues such as the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, the Chalcedonian definition, etc. Thielicke discusses the offices of Christ and the metaphors of the atonement at length. Throughout all of this development he carries through the thesis of the transcendence of Christ over all of his roles and offices. Thus, Christ both fulfills and transcends the office of prophet. With regard to the office of priest, he is the fulfillment of humanity, but also "the

crises of humanity" (Volume II, p. 371). His consistent theme in this is the "inexhaustibility of the figure of Jesus Christ." Thielicke breathes new life into the Chalcedonian forms by the way in which he utilizes the writings of Hermann, Kahler, *et al* in the process of working out his creative loyalty to the classical tradition. Is this not the continuing theological issue for today's preacher?

When he turns to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, Thielicke does not fail to cover a variety of areas which would normally fall into hermaneutic and communal or ecclesiastical concerns. Thielicke follows Luther in emphasizing the Spirit's work in bringing "Christ's work close to us and making us open to it" (Volume III, p. 55). His concern to reinforce the broader Calvinist understanding of the work is less evident, despite his claim to the contrary. The epistemological focus on the Spirit remains strong, with the discussion covered under the headings of "Presentation." What is remarkable is the absence of a basic elaboration of the fruits and the gifts of the Spirit. This lapse may typify contemporary Protestant preaching, but it does not represent the sermons of the New Testament. Despite Thielicke's criticism of Bultmann and others for omitting any serious treatment of the Holy Spirit, his own efforts remain limited in actuality to intellectual concerns.

It is quite appropriate that Thielicke include within his theological concerns a flexible if rather sharply defined discussion of the church's ministry. He appreciates the traditional anchorage provided by the liturgy in worship in contrast to the more venturesome character of preaching. His theology of the Word, however, is reaffirmed with his chastening statement that "Psychostrategy is the worst enemy of the spiritual and self-evident Word . . ." (Volume III, p. 247). He is really quite concerned to disavow any attempts to synthesize the power of the self-revelation of God with any eminent processes. This concern appears again in his section entitled "The Exclusiveness of the Gospel and the World of Religions." While the historical remoteness of the discussion is evident in the involvement with the issues raised by Hegel, Harnack, Troeltsch, and Feuerbach, it leaves no doubt that Thielicke has long departed from any proximity to the theological liberalism that is represented by those figures. What he does is to maintain quite consistently that the Christian claim to truth is in the final analysis a truth that is preserved and presented by the sovereign power of God. This is a very important caution for all of us who are concerned to identify God's actions and to include them in our sermons.

In the final section, Thielicke turns to eschatology, a subject which he declares was badly and suspiciously lacking in nineteenth century Christian theology. He covers it from two perspectives: the individual, which focuses on death and life after death, and the universal, which is concerned with hope and judgment. Reaffirming the Biblical conception of resurrection, he rejects the idea of immortality. Eternal life, in contrast to immortality, is reaffirmed through the transcendent power of Christ's resurrection. One of the appealing features in his discussion is the way in which he integrates the category of the personal with that of the transcendent and historical. This is a creative endeavor, although it is more homiletic in style than systematic. Thielicke thus

revitalizes the personal concepts of the Reformers, combining them with the underlying interpersonal imagery and concerns of the Bible. In the process he invokes their originality and power against the positivism of secular urban culture. Thielicke thus closes the last volume appropriately with the recognition that in the ongoing history that is determined by God, "our life becomes an eschatological event" (Volume III, p. 465). It is this event that provides the ultimate horizon for working out the requirements of Christian ethics, "The 'one day' gives us standards for 'today.' "

In the opening pages of the first volume Thielicke says that the title he originally preferred was *Being in Truth.* He abandoned it, however, because he intended to write "about the relation between God and man and not about a purely transcendent God taken theistically in and for himself" (Volume I, p. 15). Nevertheless, I can appreciate the potential in his original preference. Despite the many problems that are associated with the concept of "being," the original title strikes me as conveying the ontological, metaphysical overtones that characterize the concerns of Thielicke's argument. He is committed to the position that the self-revelation of God determines the nature of Christian existence. Man is, as he puts it in his terms, in relationship to God. In the context of this relationship God remains consistently the Lord who construes the path of history and draws his people into a trusting relationship. In the process of this relationship he judges and transforms us.

In what sense then is this work finally to be considered evangelical? It is conceivably evangelical in its consistent emphasis on the sovereignity and transcendence of God, the overarching significance of Christology, and the critical importance of the revelatory Biblical events. All of this, certainly without recourse to undue demythologization, is crucial for the meaning of "evangelical." This is even the case with respect to the German sense of *Evangelische.* Yet there is more at stake here. What seems to be missing in this remarkably comprehensive work is the urgency that there is a spiritual and historic crisis, that the time has fully come and that "the mystery which was kept secret for ages," as Paul puts it in Romans 16, is now disclosed . . . to bring about the obedience to the faith." As I read these volumes I am frequently moved by Thielicke's illuminating interpretation of doctrines and texts, and I am convinced that his comments are largely correct. However, I do not find in this work that encounter that confronts the reader with the inevitable resolve that the transcendent self-revelation of God creates an inescapable dilemma which must be answered. This must be the irreducible core of all preaching. What I would have preferred is that Thielicke develop further the eschatological context of the Christian faith by sharpening the particular spiritual issues of today. He could have cast the entire work on a more compelling eschatological foundation and thereby illumined the spiritual tension in which we are all moving in the ongoing summons and crises of faith. This is the basic thrust of the Biblical proclamation. In spite of this undeveloped possibility, this work is a rare achievement. What Thielicke has really done is to analyze the currents in an ocean of literature that has been published since the Reformation. He provides the chart that will guide the helmsman away from the intellectually disastrous places for the Christian preacher in modern history. He thus identifies some of

the subtle currents in Western theology and literature that might make the journey from the Reformation to the responsibility of preaching today more hazardous.

What remains now is to take this chart and to move it into the situation which Thielicke indicates is lying in wait for us beyond the barriers of eighteenth century Cartesian thought. When this is begun and a revitalized theology of proclamation begins to appear, it will be less involved with and influenced by the debates within European existentialism. It will develop further Thielicke's and, hence, Augustine's emphasis on the will of God as a viable theological category. It will be more openly in dialogue with the individual and political dilemmas around us. The heavy concentration on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in epistemological concerns will be broadened much further in the direction of the fruits of the Spirit. The unresolved tensions within the varied images of the atonement will be reconciled in a more elastic structure and will be brought into a viable relation with the doctrines of creation and salvation. Finally, his emphasis on a Christocentric focus for theology and ministry will be expanded. These are some of the issues that lie before us as we learn from Thielicke's comprehensive explorations and move with their help further in the direction of a post-enlightenment evangelical theology for preachers. Thielicke's theological guidance is important, and it will certainly prepare us to deal more effectively with the self-centered temptations in the challenge of preaching.