

Chapter 1

Setting the Stage

Thielicke's Biography as Key
to His Theology

“My theological work was always only a superstructure placed
upon the experiences and sufferings of my life . . .”

—THIELICKE, *WAYFARER*, 85 [115]

WITH THIS STATEMENT, HELMUT Thielicke reveals the exegetical key to his theological thought. If Thielicke's theology is to be adequately understood and appreciated, his personal life experience—which was, to a great degree, shaped by encounters with suffering and death—must be taken into account. By “superstructure” [Überbau] he means the theological effects of an inextricable connection between life and thought. It connotes specific theological convictions produced by “the existential drive at work”¹ in his thinking. The Thielickean “superstructure” is a theological outlook shaped by his “eschatological existence”; one that would not have arisen without this “underpinning foundation” [*Tiefenstruktur*]² that informs his work so uniquely.

For that reason, as the title of this chapter claims, Thielicke's biography constitutes the key to his theological *corpus*. It is, therefore, the purpose of this first part to analyze Thielicke's *Sitz im Leben* (his existential context) and how his personal formation and experience of life—especially his formative years, as a child and young man—served as a hotbed in which his particular theological focus on human finitude was later to flourish. Part I is thereby *not* to be regarded as a comprehensive biographical treatment, but

1. *Wayfarer*, 85 [115].

2. A fitting term coined by Langsam, *Konkretion*, 14–15.

rather as a necessarily selective look at Thielicke's life and formation as seen through the lens of suffering and death. Its aim is thus to unlock the door to Thielicke's theological outlook with the biographical key that he himself provides. It is to lay the existential foundation for the subsequent theological analysis. In this process, Thielicke's own words are given priority.³

Part One: Biographical Sources

In order to serve the purpose of presenting a reliable and objective biographical presentation, I draw on five different primary sources. The earliest autobiographical source, considered by Thielicke to be a "work report,"⁴ first appeared under the title *Begegnungen (Encounters)* in 1957. This initial account of his life and work was extended and republished twice, first in 1965 (*Auf Kanzel und Katheder [At Pulpit and Lectern]*, hereafter *K&K*), and again in 1977 (*Begegnungen und Erfahrungen [Encounters and Experiences]*, hereafter *B&E*).

The second and at the same time most comprehensive authority on Thielicke's life is his autobiography, *Zu Gast (Wayfarer)*, which originally appeared twenty months before his death, in August 1984. The latest German edition, which I have used, comprises 542 pages and, if Thielicke had had his way, would not have been so "condensed."⁵

Third, an extensive interview for the German TV documentary *Zeugen des Jahrhunderts (Witnesses to the century)*, produced by the ZDF and later published to its full extent as a book (hereafter *Krauss*), has granted additional invaluable insight and clarification. Lutheran pastor and journalist Meinold Krauss conducted six hours of Q&A over two and a half days in the first half of 1985, less than one year before Thielicke's death.⁶

A fourth indispensable source and helpful corrective to Thielicke's own published words proved to be his massive literary records archived at the University of Hamburg.⁷ Thielicke states the obvious in a letter to Paul

3. In the interest of substantive clarity, I have judged it better to refer to some relevant secondary literature after I have offered my own exposition and not before it, so I have reserved this for the end of chapters 2 and 3, respectively.

4. *K&K*, 7 [*B&E*, 7].

5. See the comment of his wife, Marieluise Thielicke, in "Freundesbrief Juni 1985," (*NHT*). The "Freundesbrief" was the couple's annual newsletter to friends.

6. See Marieluise Thielicke, "Freundesbrief Juni 1985," (*NHT*).

7. Handschriftenlesesaal der Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, Carl von Ossietzky, Von-Melle-Park 3, 20146 Hamburg, Germany. As of February 2019, the number of archived manuscripts comprises 842; the number of archived letters written by Thielicke amounts to 221; and the number of archived letters received by him account for 347. The total number of pages exceeds 8,000.

Althaus on March 27, 1945, namely that “in a letter, one can write more openly than in a public polemic.”⁸ This openness—along with unpublished material and other miscellaneous personal documents—has, without doubt, furthered the cause of this book.

Finally, a fifth source consists of scattered biographical notes throughout Thielicke’s theological writings. Thielicke sometimes refers to events in his life for illustrative purposes—especially in his homiletical works. In rare cases, these references reveal something new. Most commonly, however, they serve as a means of comparison, either strengthening or undermining statements made elsewhere.

The most helpful *secondary* source of a biographical nature proved to be the PhD project of Holger Speier, published in 2009.⁹ Speier dedicates a lengthy first chapter to outline significant events in Thielicke’s life in chronological order, making auxiliary use of the material archived in Hamburg. One other secondary source which was particularly important to consider in connection with this study (and therefore deserving of explicit mention) is a collection of four commemorative speeches. They were delivered by theological companions at an academic memorial in honor of the late Thielicke at the University of Hamburg on December 4, 1986.¹⁰ Moreover, Helmut Thielicke’s oldest son, Wolfram Thielicke, added some valuable detail to his father’s biographical representation on the occasion of a personal meeting at his Nuremberg home on September 29, 2016.

This first part is made up of three chapters, each subdivided into several subsections. In addition to the methodological remarks, the present chapter serves as a first guide to Thielicke’s complex personality. Chapter 2 focuses on Thielicke’s childhood and sickness, whereas his encounters with death and suffering during the Nazi regime gain center stage in chapter 3, closing with an overview of other encounters with the same phenomenon beyond 1945.

The major twofold impact upon his life and thinking of sickness and the Nazi regime are well recognized by Thielicke himself, as well as among secondary sources. In what follows, his sickness is given especially extensive consideration for two major reasons: first, Thielicke’s stance under the Third Reich has generally been granted much stronger academic and popular

8. The letter quoted is archived under the label *NHT : Ba : 2a*. *NHT* stands for *Nachlass Helmut Thielicke* (*Nachlass* meaning “papers” or “literary estate/remains”). Hereafter, I will not cite serial numbers of Thielicke’s archive files but only indicate such material by adding (*NHT*). For full bibliographical information, I refer the reader to the bibliography at the end.

9. Speier, *Initiator*.

10. Lippert, *Zum Gedenken an Helmut Thielicke*.

attention than his even more crucial “sickness-unto-death” (to use Kierkegaard’s phrase somewhat freely here). Consequently, by way of a detailed analysis of the said illness in chapter 2, I offer a new perspective in a fresh biographical account, as a secondary original contribution in its own right, within the framework of the primary original contribution of this book as a whole. In doing so, I draw on unpublished or no longer published secondary sources (archived at the University of Hamburg) to which English-speaking readers not familiar with German might have no other access. The second reason is that the seriousness and persistence of Thielicke’s condition must be explicated clearly and in detail—not only as a major turning-point in his life, but also since without it, as to be shown in the course of this work, many aspects of his theology would not have emerged as they did.

It is therefore substantial to unfold *both* influences systematically for the first time—as far as I am aware. By entering the house of Thielicke’s theological system via his existential main entrance, specific pieces of furniture in the mansion’s various rooms shall be examined, thereby determining whether those pieces were brought in through the same doorway.

Part Two: A Musical Analogy

“Ours is the century of death, and Mahler is its musical prophet.” These penetrating words of Leonard Bernstein,¹¹ widely considered as one of the great composers of the twentieth century, illuminate the essence of his era in a few words. As composers generally seem to display a heightened sensitivity towards culture and its accompanying *Zeitgeist*, one might look at a theologian’s favorite musician in order to gain a first insight into the theological inclination typically embedded within and consequently arising from his or her personal formation and development, i.e., one’s *Sitz im Leben*.

Before attention turns to the musical pointer, however, it is noteworthy that Thielicke himself stresses the undeniable importance of a theologian’s existential circumstances, for “a theologian’s work . . . is even more strongly related to one’s life and existence than in other faculties.”¹² Elsewhere, he reiterates that “the lives of those who do theology can never be ignored. They play a part. They have a major role. They are the battlefield between eternity and time. In them the decision is taken who or what rules and who or what serves as an instrument.”¹³

11. Bernstein, *Unanswered Question*, 313.

12. *K&K*, 8. Not contained in *B&E*.

13. *MF&T*, 5. See *MF&T*, 176; and *Wayfarer*, 73 [99], where he comments on the homiletical style of his teacher, Althaus: “There was nothing artificial about him. The truth he preached was *part of his life*.” Emphasis added.

In addition to his own personal approach to this persuasion, Thielicke most likely found further theological justification in Luther's understanding of "the subject of theology." For "subject," according to Luther, "refers both to *the one who does theology* and also to its theme."¹⁴ The truly Lutheran stance of Thielicke's thinking is further discussed in the fourth chapter. In any case, for now, the "essential connection between theology and existence"¹⁵ represents—in Thielicke's eyes—a "truism"¹⁶ whose emergence within Thielicke's consciousness is inseparably connected with his experiences of sickness and near-death, as will be shown later on. It is therefore not surprising when he states that one of his "constantly recurring theological tasks [is] to reveal the dogmas' existential relevance."¹⁷

In this fundamental conviction, he is joined by a number of notable theologians, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, according to whom "insight cannot be separated from the existence within which it is won"¹⁸; Bonhoeffer's famous teacher, Adolf Schlatter, who contends that "the state of life establishes the act of thinking"¹⁹; Jürgen Moltmann, who "found theology . . . a fascinating adventure" since "one can only stand up to it by exerting all one's heart and all one's soul and all one's strength"²⁰; and two of the outstanding Roman Catholic thinkers of the twentieth century: Karl Rahner, stating that "the personal life essentially plays itself out in the theological work,"²¹ and Joseph Ratzinger, who opines that "the mark of a great teacher of the church . . . is that he teaches by his life, since thought and life penetrate and define each other in himself."²² Likewise, yet more strongly, Lutheran theologian Helmut Gollwitzer proclaims "the blaze and blood of a living heart and a keenly lived life" to be a component of the very substance of theology: "Theological existence demands . . . will, passion, spontaneity,

14. *EvF I*, 15n2. Emphasis added. "Luther's line 'Persona facit opera,' i.e., 'it is the person who does the works,' became my leitmotif. In everything man does, wills, and accomplishes . . . he fulfills himself" (*K&K*, 16 [*B&E*, 15]).

15. *The I*, §502. "Insight and existence belong together" (*Gespräche*, 162). Compare two statements of Barth in this regard: "There is no avoiding the fact that the living object of theology concerns *the whole man*" (Barth, *Introduction*, 84) and "since the concern which claims the theologian even in his private life is total, his commitment is also total" (Barth, *Introduction*, 85). See also Romans 6:13.

16. *Kanzel*, 12, 38.

17. *Suche*, 150.

18. Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge*, 38.

19. Schlatter, *Rückblick*, 102. See also Schlatter, *Einführung*, 36.

20. Moltmann, *Experiences*, 9.

21. Rahner, *Erinnerungen*, 63. On page 105, Rahner makes the same point in relation to the Pope.

22. Ratzinger, "Einführende Worte," 16.

and tendency. Somebody claims something within theology, for within it somebody is claimed. That is why the intricacies and the incalculable of the personal life belong particularly to this very science.”²³

Returning to the discussion on musical inclination as a theological pointer within his personal life, Thielicke’s “trustful friend and colleague Dr Rainer Röhricht,”²⁴ in the commemorative speech for his former teacher, highlights the idea that a human being’s preferences in the aesthetic realm are almost always representative of his or her character (and consequently, it might now be added, of his or her theology).²⁵ The very same idea is expressed by Alan Torrance, who evaluates Karl Barth’s conception of Christian experience, for example, as seeming “predominantly to be a joyful and optimistic one.” Torrance concludes that this conception is reflected in “Barth’s at times almost embarrassingly extravagant praise and adulation of the music of Mozart.”²⁶

Jürgen Moltmann, in contrast, “cannot stand Mozart longer than one hour.” He prefers Beethoven’s compositions, the tensions in his music, instead of the omnipresent harmony and absence of conflict in Mozart.²⁷

Karl Rahner, again, had no favorite composer at all.²⁸ Perhaps this, I might add—with tongue in cheek—explains his vast number of essays and monographs on a great variety of themes without presenting a singularly prodigious, systematic work in the Barthian or Thielickean sense.

Helmut Thielicke’s favorite musician, finally, was not Gustav Mahler,²⁹ as might have been expected in light of his experiences, nor Johann Sebastian Bach, “the one composer whose music forms a perfect mirror of Lutheran theology,”³⁰ but Joseph Haydn. The calmness, sobriety, and reasonableness

23. Marquardt, “Helmut Gollwitzer,” 558–59. Compare Clark’s statement: “The predispositions or desires of the knowing subject need not decisively control genuine knowledge of God and thus obscure God. As theologians, we can allow the subject of investigation . . . to exert a dominant influence on our knowing process” (Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 215). Similarly, Polanyi states: “Into every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known . . . this coefficient is no mere imperfection but a vital component of his knowledge” (Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, viii).

24. *EvF I*, 17. See *B&E*, 218.

25. Röhricht, “Thielicke,” 21.

26. Torrance, “Christian Experience and Divine Revelation,” 111. Thanks to Stephen N. Williams for providing me with this source.

27. Moltmann, “Look Forward!” reply to second last question.

28. See Rahner, *Erinnerungen*, 66.

29. Mahler was greatly admired by the one politician who became the unprecedented epitome for Bernstein’s “death-ridden century,” Adolf Hitler. See Hamann, *Hitlers Wien*, 94–95, 499.

30. Herz, “Bach’s Religion,” 129.

of the Austrian composer obviously appealed to Thielicke's own nature, with its disgust of fanaticism and enthusiasm [*Schwärmerei*],³¹ a nature "by no means" tending towards optimism.³²

It is therefore telling to observe how he describes his own theological position in light of this (without wanting to imply, by way of the previous paragraph, that the following positions are to be classified as "fanatic" or "enthusiastic"). When asked by a student where he puts himself theologically, Thielicke once responded: "I am sailing in line, astern Barth and Brunner, but trying to steer my own course."³³ In a letter to Hermann Diem on May 16, 1947, he delineates this in more detail: "Every serious theologian of our generation is somehow rooted in that place where Barth had his Romans breakthrough. Now this place as starting point . . . yields different directions to proceed, of which Barth and his people only represent one. I sit on another branch of the same tree."³⁴ On this basis, it is possible to locate Thielicke firstly and roughly as a second-generation dialectical theologian, finding his own particular focus within the said parameter.³⁵

31. Röhrich, "Thielicke," 21. Thielicke's preference for these special characteristics was certainly already predisposed by the influence of his mother, who "was a sober woman who treated herself with puritanical strictness . . . Her piety was sincere and profound, though stamped with a Calvinistic sobriety" (*Wayfarer*, 15 [26]). See Krauss, 15–16.

32. *Wayfarer*, 419 [535].

33. Cited in Quest, "Thielicke," 549. That Thielicke was sailing more in Brunner's wake than Barth's will become clearer as we proceed. For now, see Brunner's comment in *Wayfarer*, 131 [174], and the following remarks of Brunner in the same personal letter to Thielicke on September 25, 1947 (*NHT*) (not published in *Wayfarer*): "In my eyes you are a big-time hope on the theological field. Not just because of your extraordinary prowess, but also because *I have confidence in your overall alignment.*" Emphasis added. A few lines earlier, Brunner states: "That Barth makes you responsible for the 'hardening' of the theologians I find amusing and at the same time saddening, for it shows how definitely he identifies matters with KB. Whoever is not with me [KB] is hardened towards God." Here, Brunner probably refers to the issue of Germany's collective guilt, over which Thielicke plunged into great controversy with Barth after 1945. See Greschat, *Die Schuld der Kirche*; Besier and Sauter, *Wie Christen ihre Schuld bekennen*, esp. 9–61; and the dissertation of Richter-Böhne, *Unbekannte Schuld*.

34. *SdA*, 23. See *KuÖ*, 40–41, where he states his own commitment to the nature and task of the original dialectical theology, not without making some reservations concerning the later development of the movement.

35. For a helpful secondary source to approximate Thielicke's overall position, see the comprehensive work of Boa and Bowman Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons, Part five*. Although the authors do not concentrate on Thielicke, his thinking principally matches the basic fideist criteria presented here. See esp. 409–12 for a brief overview of the central *loci*, and 361, where a quotation from Bloesch refers to him as a neo-Lutheran in the fideist strand.

Part Three: Thielicke's Personality —An Introductory Sketch

Taking this musical analogy as a starting point, a first introductory sketch of Thielicke's nature may be attempted. The already mentioned Röhricht places his former friend's personality type between moods of dejection and a radiant zest for life. Thielicke was able to unfold a kind of "Dionysian joy of the self," and yet, at the same time, he was always aware of the dark depths of human life—with its basis in guilt and death.³⁶

Röhricht's appraisal of Thielicke's antipodean nature—swinging between melancholy and sanguinity, misery and joviality—is in full accordance with Thielicke's own description of the "crass difference" of his parents' tempers. Whereas his mother had a very withdrawn and sober personality, merely pouring out her feelings in many letters,³⁷ his father, in stark contrast, tended to the other extreme, displaying uncontrolled emotions as well as an inclination to overdo things.³⁸ Hence, both sides already provided a predisposition for characteristic manifestations in their son.

This initial predisposition is further played out in Thielicke's life as described in his autobiography, which, in different places, endorses the supposition that his psychology was pendular. As to the first, "low" end, Thielicke paradigmatically remembers a "foolish error" of his youth. After recognizing his ignorance in this particular situation, Thielicke "fell into great despondency."³⁹ Later on, during his first post-war professorship, Thielicke recalls: "My Tübingen period was also marked by periods of severe depression." Due to difficulties, defamations, and denunciations, Thielicke discloses "a range of sharply differing moods with which I had great difficulty in coping. . . . I often suffered periods of extreme despair."⁴⁰

Perhaps even more serious fits of dejection can be ascribed to the time when one of the "saddest phases" in his life began, namely, the student revolt in the late sixties.⁴¹ Thielicke's personal letters from his literary records, archived at the University of Hamburg, reveal a much gloomier and more desperate inner state during this particular period—*inter alia* leading to a

36. Röhricht, "Thielicke," 26–27. Some parallels to certain character traits of his favorite composer, Haydn, do in fact appear. See Kavanaugh, *Spiritual Lives*, 37–43.

37. See *Wayfarer*, 16 [26–27].

38. See *Wayfarer*, 16 [27].

39. *Wayfarer*, 59 [82]. See K&K, 13 [B&E, 12].

40. *Wayfarer*, 226 [291].

41. *Wayfarer*, 377 [483]. For Thielicke's account of the student revolts, see *Wayfarer*, 377–99 [483–511]; and B&E, 173–91. In his monograph, *Kulturkritik*, he analyses the movement's philosophical roots.

temporal hospitalization, due to exhaustion⁴²—than is expressed in his autobiography.⁴³ The same conclusion can be reached regarding his existential struggle during the Nazi period, which will be discussed shortly.

Asked about this specific characteristic, Thielicke's oldest son, Wolfram, cautiously affirms that one cannot speak about his father's dejection in the sense of being manic-depressive but rather as having an awareness of the dark depths of human life, as mainly experienced through the three life phases: sickness, war, and student revolt.⁴⁴ Wolfram remembers one specific and recurring situation where he personally witnessed "a constant concern" of his father: for a while, he and his brother Berthold accompanied their dad in the car on his monthly trip to St. Michaelis church, where Thielicke delivered his famous sermons. The crowds wanting to hear him were so great that six policemen had to be placed around the building as parking-assistants to help with the traffic. Wolfram reports that every time they left home, one hour before the service began, his father became greatly frightened in the car at the prospect of no one (or merely a few people) turning up to hear him preach. Each time, those fears were only allayed by Thielicke finally sighting the policemen, whose presence promised the appearance of many listeners.

This deeply personal insight also reveals how much Thielicke identified himself with his success as a preacher—the role that, after all, he was mainly known for. Apparently, for him, failure in this area would have meant the loss of public status, of being appreciated.⁴⁵ Overall, however, Wolfram concludes

42. See *Wayfarer*, 388–89 [498]. See also Thielicke's letters to the Minister of Justice, Gustav Heinemann (1966–69; and Germany's president from 1969–74), on February 17, 1968 (*NHT*), and to Dr. Wulff on June 12, 1968 (*NHT*).

43. I am indebted to Speier, *Initiator*, 67n166, for originally drawing my attention to this fact.

44. Wolfram Thielicke in a personal meeting at his Nuremberg home, September 29, 2016.

45. A certain general disposition to crave acclaim is also detectable in the partly heroic portrayals in his autobiography. For Thielicke's somewhat self-aggrandizing undertone, see the paradigmatic depictions in *Wayfarer*, 88–89 [119–20], 105 [141], 112 [149–50], 117–19 [156–58], and 121–23 [161–63]. For his emphasis on being acclaimed, compare the following statements, for example: "The audience pointedly received us with seemingly neverending applause" (*Wayfarer*, 88 [119]); "They received me with thunderous applause and were clearly inspired and delighted by my protest" (*Wayfarer*, 92 [124–25]); "It was a source of some embarrassment that virtually every student preferred my lectures to his" (*Wayfarer*, 111 [148]); "Afterwards, I received a small ovation from my comrades" (*Wayfarer*, 122 [160]); and "My lecture took place and . . . was met with 'loud applause'" (*Wayfarer*, 343 [439]). For similar boastful tendencies during his childhood and youth, see *Wayfarer*, 27, 59 [41, 81]. For Thielicke hereby strongly taking after his father, see *Wayfarer*, 12, 14–15 [22, 25–26]; see also chapter 3, part one.

that the joy of living predominated in the life of his father, thus directing our attention to the second, “high” end of his personality.⁴⁶

Thielicke’s general *Lebensfreude* is already expressed by the German title of his autobiography, *Zu Gast auf einem schönen Stern* (literally: “Visiting a beautiful star”).⁴⁷ Although he describes his nature as “by no means” tending towards optimism,⁴⁸ Thielicke nevertheless presents the crucial theological justification for his *joie de vivre* in God’s promise after the flood (Genesis 6), as symbolized by the rainbow.⁴⁹ Accordingly, in a letter congratulating Thielicke on his sixtieth birthday, his former colleague and friend in Heidelberg, Lutheran church historian Hans von Campenhausen refers to the honoree’s appeal which can not only be grasped in his books, but, above all, in his “lively persona.” Von Campenhausen remembers an “always open, uninhibited, and intimate Thielicke.”⁵⁰

Rudolf Haas, another companion, likewise comments on Thielicke’s zest for life permeating the whole of his preaching,⁵¹ and his son, Berthold, confirms the Dionysian spirit by stating his father’s enjoyment of life until the very end.⁵² This latter assertion is well illustrated by Berthold’s older

46. See Chesterton’s anthropological insight: “Man is more himself, man is more manlike, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial. Melancholy should be an innocent interlude, a tender and fugitive frame of mind; praise should be the permanent pulsation of the soul. Pessimism is at best an emotional half-holiday; joy is the uproarious labour by which all things live” (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 138).

47. *Wayfarer*, 418–19 [534–36].

48. *Wayfarer*, 419 [535].

49. “Indeed, I have encountered no darkness above which it [the rainbow] does not shine and no valley, no matter how gloomy, which some of God’s greetings [i.e., blessings] have not reached” (*Wayfarer*, 419 [535]). For the rainbow as a “hint from another world whilst . . . cross[ing] the dark valleys and cry[ing] out from the depth,” see esp. *Welt*, 14, 196, 317–18.

50. Letter from Hans von Campenhausen on November 8, 1968 (*NHT*). For Thielicke’s characterisation of Campenhausen, see *Wayfarer*, 99–100 [132–34]. For another “real-life-example” as to his *Lebensfreude*, see *B&E*, 210. See also *Welt*, 21, and esp. 34–38.

51. Haas and Haug, *Thielicke*, 28. Thielicke was “very unhappy,” however, about the first contribution of Haas to this sixtieth-birthday surprise in book form, since Haas portrays him as a “shadowless-docetic ghost.” “Fortunately,” Haug’s second portrayal “makes up a lot.” See Thielicke’s letter to Rudolf Augstein on October 15, 1968 (*NHT*).

52. Berthold Thielicke, “Vorwort,” in *Schweigen*, 7. Thielicke and his wife, Marieluise, née Herrmann, to whom he got married in October 1937 (see *Wayfarer*, 106 [142]), had four children: Wolfram, Berthold, Elisabeth, and Rainer. See *Wayfarer*, 126–27, 149, 280–84 [167, 194, 359–64]. From all accounts, they enjoyed a happy marriage, a fact Campenhausen also refers to in his letter. Eight years after her husband’s death, Marieluise Thielicke published her childhood memories under the title *Aus meiner Kinderzeit*. In 2010, she died in Nuremberg, where she spent the final year and a half of her life near her oldest son, Wolfram, and daughter-in-law, Karina.

brother, Wolfram, who reports that two weeks before Thielicke's actual death on March 5, 1986, he travelled from his Nuremberg home up to Hamburg, prompted by the news that his father would not make it through the night. Against all odds, however, Thielicke recovered and, according to Wolfram, was full of joy the next morning—in light of the fact that he had cheated death.⁵³

Correspondingly, Thielicke, in spite of being German (I might say with tongue-in-cheek), was known for his outspoken sense of humor. In addition to family and friends explicitly referring to this side in his nature,⁵⁴ as well as Barth's specific comment,⁵⁵ Thielicke also published a book in 1974 titled: *The Laughter of the Saints and Fools: Some Thoughts on Wit and Humor*, thus expressing the importance of humor to his life and theology. In Thielicke's eyes, humor is essentially a means and "a sign of overcoming this world" [*ein Zeichen der Weltüberwindung*].⁵⁶

This significant insight is echoed by at least two other great theologians of the twentieth century. Whereas Dietrich Bonhoeffer specifically states that "final severity never lacks a dose of humor,"⁵⁷ the broader stance of "joyful overcoming" (within which the specific characteristic of humor is embedded) is well explicated by Joseph Ratzinger. Focusing on how the Beatitudes are played out existentially in the life of the Apostle Paul, Ratzinger emphasizes that "in the midst of suffering, Jesus alone provides [deep, real] joy" (as opposed to the shallow, surreal "happiness" the world offers). Paul experiences "infinite joy precisely by being delivered [up to suffering and persecution], by giving himself up, in order to bring Christ to men."⁵⁸

53. Wolfram Thielicke in a personal meeting, September 29, 2016. Thielicke's attitude regarding death during his final days thus differs to such as that of seventeenth-century Scottish Covenanter martyr, John Nesbit, who gladly welcomed death along with God's ensuing immediacy. See Rusten and Rusten, *One Year Christian History*, 678–79.

54. In the same conversation, Wolfram recounts how, upon his return home from a voyage, Thielicke locked himself away for several hours with his longtime foster-son (who had lost both parents and, as a student, became a full member of the Thielicke-family). In that time, he told the son all the (partially dirty) jokes that he had collected in written form from the sailors during the voyage. Their broad laughter could be heard throughout the house. See also Haas and Haug, *Thielicke*, 23, 102.

55. See *Wayfarer*, 241–42 [310]. In passing, Zahrnt, *Sache*, 127, in the context of criticizing Barth's monistic tendency and "a-historicalness" [*Geschichtslosigkeit*], highlights the theologically questionable facet of the Swiss's wit. I leave it to the reader's judgement whether Barth's comments on Althaus (see *Wayfarer*, 70–71 [95–97]) amount to social inappropriateness or a great sense of humor.

56. *Krauss*, 66; *Humor*, 96–101. See also *K&K*, 50–51, 168 [*B&E*, 44, 119–20].

57. Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand*, 201.

58. Ratzinger, *Jesus I*, 101–3. Ratzinger particularly bases his observations, amongst other passages, on 2 Corinthians 4:8–10; 6:8–10.

This phenomenon of deep, Pauline-like joy amidst agony, potentially unloaded in what Thielicke calls “eschatological laughter,” was also experienced, for example, by Roman Catholic priest Johann Lenz during his internment in Gusen concentration camp,⁵⁹ as well as by Thielicke himself during an air raid.⁶⁰ While cynical skeptics might judge such happenings as an overreaction of the nerves to the existential borderline, followers of Christ recognize in this the peace of their master, which the world cannot give.⁶¹

Thielicke’s elliptical personality, finally, is also reflected in his preaching methodology. Friedrich Langsam, focusing his PhD-research on Thielicke’s homiletical methodology, compares the Thielickean approach with “a kind of [intended] zig-zag course . . . oscillating from one extreme to the other.” This “serpentine-like” preaching style enables the advancement of knowledge by getting to the bottom of both extremes of human experience, thereby finding the solution somewhere in the middle.⁶² Again, Thielicke himself endorses this analysis existentially by speaking, for example (in the context of deciding to go for an operation in 1929), of “my delight in dramatic and quick solutions.”⁶³

Several secondary sources further endorse the conclusion that Thielicke’s biography provides the *key* to his theology.⁶⁴ In the correct words of Langsam, Thielicke and his work can only be fully understood in a retrospect of his life.⁶⁵ Likewise, Röhrich proclaims, in the memorial speech for his late friend and teacher, “from now on, we can evaluate Thielicke *sub specie aeternitatis* . . . Then one will be able to evaluate him more justly than the polemics and enthusiasm during his lifetime.”⁶⁶

Thus, one of Thielicke’s favorite quotes, the words of Joseph Wittig, certainly applies to his own life as well: “a biography really should not begin with a man’s birth, but with his death . . . for only there can one see the

59. See Lenz, *Christus in Dachau*, 62–63.

60. See *Humor*, 177–80.

61. See John 14:27.

62. Langsam, *Konkretion*, 122–23. Remember also his locating himself between Barth and Brunner earlier.

63. *Wayfarer*, 59–60 [82]. See *K&K*, 13 [*B&E*, 12–13]. The same disposition comes to the fore after his operation failed and he was faced with one final chance to take a yet untested medicine: “I wanted to force a decision: either this maximum dose of the medicine would help me or the ‘poison’ would kill me” (*K&K*, 65 [*B&E*, 89]). See also chapter 2, part two.

64. See Röhrich, “Thielicke,” 19–20; Langsam, *Konkretion*, 5–6, 12; and Speier, *Initiator*, 16.

65. Langsam, *Konkretion*, 6.

66. Röhrich, “Thielicke,” 28.

whole of his life in its fulfillment.⁶⁷ Thielicke's life and work was completed on March 5, 1986. As tempting as Wittig's suggestion may seem, however, our investigation must commence in his childhood, for it is here that the foundations for his later theological inspiration were first laid.

SAMPLE

67. *Freedom*, 167. See also *EvF II*, 449; *Ernstfall*, 76; *Lebensangst*, 200; *Nihilismus*, 73; *GldChr*, 413; *Gebet*, 67; *Mensch*, 330; *Woran*, 253; and *K&K*, 237.