

## Chapter 4

# The Lutheran Way

### Thielicke's Conversion and Thought in Historical Context

LIKE ROMAN CATHOLIC PHILOSOPHER von Hildebrand, Thielicke emphasizes death as a human determinant: "Death is feared because it lies like a shadow over the whole of life, characterizing it as a 'being for death.'"<sup>1</sup> I have shown in the first part that different events in Thielicke's life in general, and his "sickness-unto-death" in particular, enforced his contemplative confrontation with the phenomenon of death. Hence, Thielicke's recognition of the power of death was a deeply existential matter. His literary engagement with it became reality by his finally being able to say in the first person: "I die." That is, the focus on death and suffering biographically "grew" inside Thielicke.<sup>2</sup>

With respect to his book, *Living with Death* [*LmdT*], one reviewer aptly states that "the overriding accomplishment which renders this text so highly significant is that Thielicke has placed awareness of death at the very heart of Christian living."<sup>3</sup> To document that this awareness is the fruit of Thielicke's specific *Sitz im Leben* was the aim of part I. To show how it plays itself out in his theological thought will be the purpose of parts II and III.

Although I draw from his homiletical, pastoral, ethical, and dogmatic sources equally, I will nonetheless have a stronger focus on ethical and especially dogmatic themes in chapters 4 to 7 (part II), whilst his homiletical

1. *EvF III*, 389. "Death is not life's endpoint but its essence" (*Tod*, 161). See also *Woran*, 173–74; *Suche*, 150; and von Hildebrand, *Tod*, 14: "Every man lives in the shadow of death, *in umbra mortis*."

2. See *ThE II/1*, §631; *LmdT*, 17. Thielicke further likes to quote Rilke's differentiation between little and big death in this regard. See also *EvF III*, 391; *ThE II/1*, §635, §1205–6; *Mensch*, 399; *Tod*, 76–77; *LmdT*, 71; and *Sterben*, 32.

3. Walker Jr., "Living with Death," 414.

and pastoral emphases will be examined in chapters 8 to 10 (part III). Since Thielicke himself, in truly Lutheran fashion,<sup>4</sup> considers the ethical task to be of dogmatic rank,<sup>5</sup> it can likewise only be proper for any investigation of his work to avoid setting up a false divide between the primary material. His *Theological Ethics* is thus treated with the same systematic importance as his three volumes of *The Evangelical Faith* and his anthropology, without setting the first apart conceptually.

Chapter 1 began with the key words of Thielicke that “my theological work was always only a superstructure placed upon the experiences and sufferings of my life.”<sup>6</sup> If Thielicke’s statement is true, then we must expect to find a processing and explicit outworking of such experiences and sufferings in his theological work. I will begin my analysis in this chapter by trying to show the truly Lutheran embeddedness of Thielicke’s “sickness-unto-death.” This will provide us with a theological framework within which his specific life and work is to be located, thus serving as a basis for our subsequent chapters.

### Part One: The Lutheran Thought-form of Relation —Man *coram Deo* and the Analogy of Faith

In the second chapter, the principal analogy between Thielicke’s Good Friday experience and Martin Luther’s understanding of coming to faith was initially implied. In the same context, it was further indicated that Thielicke neither subscribes to a pietistic manifestation of conversion, nor indeed applies the term itself to his own experience.

As to the former, Thielicke somewhat derogatively describes a pietistic conversion he experienced as a fourteen-year-old in his autobiography.<sup>7</sup> Although in retrospect he regards “the dense, pietistically saturated atmosphere” of the religious circle within which his adolescent, “ardent love for Jesus à la Zinzendorf” was first ignited as “pretty extravagant,” he nevertheless expresses thankfulness for this “exuberance of piety which was so elementary

4. See Althaus, *Luther*, 27.

5. He states that his “*Theological Ethics*, especially the first volume, is already in large part a dogmatics” (*EvF I*, 13). Furthermore, a theological ethics “must at first itself be a part of the dogmatic doctrine of principles” (*ThE I*, vii). See also *Mensch*, 21: “The *Theological Ethics* . . . is virtually already conceived as an anthropology.”

6. *Wayfarer*, 85 [115].

7. *Zu Gast*, 59–60 [*Wayfarer*, 41–42]. For a closer look at the soul of classical pietism, see Spener, *Pia Desideria*. For a helpful secondary source, see Brown, *Understanding Pietism*.

that it almost made one's heart burst, filling it with bliss."<sup>8</sup> That this specific impression had deeply engraved itself on Thieliicke became clear to him only much later, when he participated in the ecstatic Afro-American church services during his visits to the USA.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, Thieliicke concludes that he learned to see that "all this was rather psychological [*seelisch*], with the secret of faith being at home in quite another dimension."<sup>10</sup> Yet, that the pietistic influence never really left him will become clearer later on.

As to the latter, Thieliicke, in spite of avoiding the term "conversion," regards his "resurrection" on Good Friday, 1933, as shown in chapter 2, part two, to be the key moment in his life at which he came to a personal, trusting faith in Jesus Christ. His coming to faith thereby falls under the first of two ways via which man—according to Thieliicke—can arrive at religion, defined by him as "the transparency of final reality." This first access route he calls the "ecstasis of experiencing the absolute" [*Ekstasis des Unbedingtheitserlebnisses*].<sup>11</sup> To be clear, Thieliicke's Maundy Thursday experience should not be equated with the conventional meaning of the term "ecstasis" (Greek *ek*, out of; *stasis*, a standing), i.e., a sort of trance. But in his eyes, he certainly experienced the absolute, final reality that night, without, however, any trance-like "condition in which ordinary consciousness and the perception of natural circumstances were withheld."<sup>12</sup> And whereas he rejects, not unlike Barth, religion as *human reaction* to such an encounter by which man distorts God, it is still important to note that Thieliicke does not negate the two above-mentioned ways of encounter, which may or may not lead to this religiously distorting reaction.<sup>13</sup>

This comes into sharper relief if we draw a parallel to Martin Luther himself, to whose line of thought Thieliicke confessionally subscribes. Gerhard Ebeling, in his memorial speech in honor of the late Thieliicke, discusses Luther's own early encounter with death via mishap and storm, which provided Luther with his unusual power to speak about the theme of death.<sup>14</sup> Ebeling thus subtly and without explicit mention puts Thieliicke's

8. *Zu Gast*, 59–60 [*Wayfarer*, 41–42]. This is my own translation.

9. With his pietistic roots, he joins the ranks of two thinkers he held in high esteem: Kant and Schleiermacher. For the former, see Geier, *Kants Welt*, 21–27, esp. 23–25. For the latter, see Clements, *Schleiermacher*, 15; and Dyrness, "The Pietistic Heritage of Schleiermacher," 15–17. See also *MF&T*, 168–73.

10. *Zu Gast*, 59–60 [*Wayfarer*, 41–42].

11. "EdR," 65. The second way consists of "the rationality of metaphysical reflection." It is noteworthy that in this context, Thieliicke seems to grant both ways validity.

12. "EdR," 44. See Vine, *Expository Dictionary*, 1160.

13. "EdR," 68.

14. Ebeling, "Todes Tod," 41.

experiential background on a par with the great Reformer's own existential key event.

Indeed, the intriguing similarities between Luther and Thielicke do not stop there but segue into their subsequent reflections as to (a) what makes one a theologian and (b) what theology actually is. By briefly unfolding Luther's answers to these questions, one might almost get the impression that Thielicke's experience and ensuing thought-process follow Luther's "existential-theological blueprint." As this is, of course, impossible, it is all the more intriguing considering how much like "chalk and cheese" Thielicke and Luther are in their existentially-founded replies to the above-mentioned questions.

Regarding the first question (as to what a theologian is made of), Oswald Bayer highlights Luther's deliberate prioritization of this question over the second one, concerning the essence of theology. For the unique life story of each individual is constitutive for answering the second question of what theology is.<sup>15</sup> The existential context cannot be left out.<sup>16</sup> More precisely, in light of the fundamental importance of temptation (*tentatio*) for the theologian's life, the essential nature of theology as a "theology of the cross" is anticipated already.

The theological reason for this is to be found in Luther's and Thielicke's personalistic view of man's existence *coram Deo*.<sup>17</sup> According to Ebeling, the Latin preposition *coram* is "the key word to Luther's understanding of being."<sup>18</sup> Translatable into the English *before* (German: *vor*), "it implies a determination of place which as such is a determination of time. Its precise meaning . . . is 'before the face of,' 'in the sight of.'"<sup>19</sup> Luther's—and subsequently, Thielicke's—anthropological conviction of man's existence "in the presence of" God,<sup>20</sup> thus defining man not in himself "but . . . in terms of the

15. Bayer, *Luther's Theology*, 15–16.

16. See Thielicke's own as well as other noted theologians' remarks presented in chapter 1, part two.

17. By "personalistic" I do not mean Thielicke's adherence to a certain strand of philosophical Personalism (for an overview, see Williams and Bengtsson, "Personalism"). Rather, it is to highlight (a) Thielicke's Lutheran-anthropological conviction of man's existence *coram* the tri-personal God; and (b) his almost exclusive focus on the *person* of Jesus of Nazareth, especially when dealing with the question of theodicy (see chapter 7).

18. Ebeling, *Luther*, 193. Gloege, "Personalismus," 25, confirms: "Luther thinks in concretely personal terms. Concretely, i.e., as man who receives his life 'coram Deo.'"

19. Ebeling, *Luther*, 193.

20. "God is the basis, goal, and meaning of my existence and to that extent of my thinking, willing, and acting, of my capacity to think, and also of my freedom" (*EvF I*, 367).

relationship of something else with [him],<sup>21</sup> thereby also determines their rejection of any ontological schema of thought in favor of a personalistic, relational one:

[For] the profundity of the situation to which the *coram*-relationship leads is naturally only manifested in an encounter between one person and another. The most important element in the situation that is implied by the preposition *coram* is . . . the way that I myself am before someone else and exist in the sight of someone else, *so that my existential life is affected*.<sup>22</sup>

The whole of man's existence is involved in this encounter between the divine and the human person. In his whole being, man is either disposed towards God in faith or against God in unbelief; and, for that reason, exists either towards God or away from God.<sup>23</sup> Thus, Thieliicke enunciates that "Luther is right to allow only two attributes to remain: belief and unbelief. Herein the whole relational character of man is being expressed most consistently."<sup>24</sup>

For Luther, the person is "always only an *actus* [hence: *actuality*], namely, either of positive relationship or . . . negative relationship with God."<sup>25</sup> Gloege traces the early form of such personal thinking beyond Luther and via Augustine back to Plato. Thieliicke supports his own personalistic understanding by referring to the latter in his essay, "Truth and Understanding." On the basis of equating the question of truth with the question of meaning,<sup>26</sup> Thieliicke defines the human condition ultimately as being related to meaning or meaninglessness, either upholding man in case of the former or destroying him if the latter.<sup>27</sup> Agreeing with Heidegger that the being of man is "ontically distinguished" by being concerned with being whilst being [or: whilst man is/exists],<sup>28</sup> he concludes that being itself

21. Ebeling, *Luther*, 194.

22. Ebeling, *Luther*, 196. Emphasis added.

23. See Ebeling, *Luther*, 200–1.

24. *ThE I*, §873. See also *ThE I*, §268, 275–76; *EvF II*, 200, 310; and *Offenbarung*, 153: "The I is a relational term." Emil Brunner shares the same view. See his *Dogmatics II*, 58–59; and *Letter to the Romans*, 17.

25. Luther cited in Gloege, "Personalismus," 32.

26. "The question of meaning is the most urgent of all. [It] is identical with the question of truth, which determines life. Truth, enquired about in the question of meaning, decides whether we can stand reality. [Truth] would thus be reality's absolute carrying principle" ("WuV," 115).

27. Hence, Thieliicke, *Mensch*, 443–44, strongly objects to Sigmund Freud seeing a sign of sickness in the very question of meaning and value.

28. "WuV," 118. [*Dass es diesem Seienden in seinem Sein um dieses Sein selbst geht.*] That is, man, by virtue of his self-awareness, is enabled to concern himself with the question of being.

is a relation, i.e., that man in his being relates to the essence of being via a relation of being [*Seinsverhältnis*], which is the truth.

Thielicke states that this was already Plato's understanding, as Plato regards man's essence as originating from his relation to that which truly has (or is) being.<sup>29</sup> That is why "meaning and meaninglessness always incarnate themselves in persons,"<sup>30</sup> for "man 'is' his relation to God."<sup>31</sup> Man's "God-likeness is a relational concept [*Relationsbegriff*]."<sup>32</sup> Thielicke expands this, saying that "personhood . . . is and is present [*ist und west*] within man's relation to the divine ground of being which, in turn, determines him."<sup>33</sup> His relational understanding of man is thereby given classical expression in the parable of the prodigal son<sup>34</sup> as well as in Thomas Carlyle's "tadpole-illustration."<sup>35</sup> According to the latter, man's essence is not defined by his evolutionary relation to the below (illustrated by the tadpole), but by his heavenly relation to the above (illustrated by Psalm 8:6).<sup>36</sup> This illustration, according to Thielicke, boils "anthropology's crucial problem"<sup>37</sup> down to its very relational essence.<sup>38</sup>

29. In *EvF II*, 106–7; and *Mensch*, 158, Thielicke acknowledges the ancient Greek endowment of man with the *humanum* since man is defined as theonomous by virtue of his relation to the gods. Gloege contraposes the "metaphysically founded" "platonicaugustinian type" of personalism with the "aristotelian-thomistic" understanding of person, the former thereby providing Luther with the philosophical foundation upon which he developed his concrete personalism (Gloege, "Personalismus," 23–26).

30. "WuV," 118.

31. *EvF I*, 15. See also *ThE I*, §317.

32. *ThE II/1*, §1251.

33. *ThE II/1*, §1260. Correspondingly, in *EvF III*, 412, Thielicke defines the soul as "the epitome of the relation to God." "Soul is man as he is addressed by God's Word." He concludes: "The one firm point is that the concept of the soul cannot be abandoned when we have to speak of bodily death . . . Soul is thus a term for partnership in this history. It denotes the I in fellowship with God's Thou. It thus remains relational." In *EvF III*, 414, Thielicke declares the convergence of his view with "what Ratzinger has in mind when he refers to 'dialogical immortality.'" Ratzinger, in the afterword to the sixth German edition of his *Eschatologie*, 205n27, states that "Thielicke, subsequent to my eschatology, refined his position, largely aligning it with my own."

34. See *EvF I*, 146–51; *EvF III*, 174; *ThE I*, §817–18, §837–42, §871; *ThE II/1*, §1308–9; and *Mensch*, 237–38, 394.

35. See *Mensch*, 430–31; *GldChr*, 335–36; *Anfechtung*, 7; *Sterben*, 61; and *Welt*, 92.

36. "The immanent continuity of man's evolution merely constitutes a biological medium within which man's actual humanness emerges as an underivable factum" (*ThE II/1*, §1260).

37. *Mensch*, 62, 431.

38. *ThE II/1*, §1272–73. See also *Kulturkritik*, 46, where he classifies his conviction of man being a relation as "a basic law of every anthropology."

Consequently, Thieliicke rejects both the *analogia entis* mode of thought<sup>39</sup> and, along with Luther, any ontological definition of God's image in human nature in favor of a purely relational characterization: "The *imago Dei* does not express humans' substantial attributes in themselves, but [is the expression of] an external quality [*Außerschaft*] of a co-relation [*Gemeinschaftsbeziehung*]." <sup>40</sup> By "external quality" he simply means, in contrast to Schlatter, for example,<sup>41</sup> that man's God-likeness is not intrinsically grounded in a human quality like reason, will, freedom, etc., but rather is extrinsically based on God's relation to man, on his being "Immanuel": God's image in man is not "essential potency" [*inhaltliche Potenz*], but a relation.<sup>42</sup> It is furthermore the *imago's character indelebilis*<sup>43</sup> that constitutes the indispensable worth of human life, thus establishing Thieliicke's tireless stress not on the intrinsic, but on the *alien* dignity of man: "Man 'is' something because God thinks of him, because God has this *imago* of him," man's essence thereby being "secured and hidden as an alienum in the heart of God."<sup>44</sup>

Thus for Thieliicke the *imago Dei*, constituting man's alien dignity, and the term "person" are interchangeable,<sup>45</sup> leading him time and again to render Luther's phrase variedly that "God does not love us because we are of

39. From his theological dissertation (*G&E*: his "theological firstling" completed in 1934. See *G&E*, 19; and *Wayfarer*, 77-79 [105-7]) onwards, Thieliicke, like Barth, rejects all forms of natural theology and *analogia entis* modes of thinking in favor of the *analogia fidei*. See *EvF I*, 310, 370; *Anfechtung*, 39, 58; and *LmdT*, 315n1. One's respective preference is, according to Thieliicke, rooted in the schema of thought to which priority is given: either ontological (analogy of being) or personal (analogy of faith). See *EvF III*, 224.

40. *The I*, §785; *The III*, §1865. See *Abenteuer*, 223; *Welt*, 93; *The I*, §793; and §763-828 for his general systematic unfolding of the *imago Dei*. Nordlander, *Gott-ebenbildlichkeit*, dedicated his PhD thesis to Thieliicke's understanding of man's God-likeness. Furthermore, see Thieliicke's anthropological work, *Mensch*, published five years after Nordlander's thesis, esp. 62, 101-2, 107, 138, 158-59, 161, 227-29, 236, 396, 425-31.

41. Schlatter evaluates man's essence as an intrinsic God-likeness which, contrary to the interpretation of Protestant Orthodoxy, did not get entirely lost but characterizes empirical man, too. See Neuer, *Schlatter: Ein Leben*, 169.

42. *The I*, §781. In this regard, Thieliicke commends the same perspective which Melancthon took regarding the being of Christ: the Son of God is not recognized in his metaphysical attributes but rather in his *beneficia*, in his salvation-historical [*heilsgeschichtlich*] efficacy. See Ebeling, *Luther*, 194, 200-1.

43. See *Mensch*, 429-30; *Gespräche*, 54-55; *The I*, §792, §823; and *The II/1*, §1262-63; Man's relation to God, his *imago Dei*, cannot get lost for "even a broken relation still is a relation."

44. *The I*, §821. See also *The I*, §462, 868-69.

45. See *The I*, §1410; Nordlander, *Gott-ebenbildlichkeit*, 93.

such worth but we are of worth—we bear the alien dignity—because God loves us.”<sup>46</sup> Although Thielicke, unsurprisingly, finds philosophical support in Pascal and, especially, Kierkegaard,<sup>47</sup> his espousal of man’s alien dignity is firmly rooted in Luther’s doctrine of justification “as the act through which God grants a man value in relationship to him.”<sup>48</sup>

Being primarily concerned with the divine-human *relation*—and not with a purely transcendent God taken theistically in and for himself<sup>49</sup>—Thielicke not only concludes that talk of God is merely possible in such a way that one speaks of God’s *relation* to man,<sup>50</sup> but also that “man cannot understand himself so long as he does not know God and understand himself *in relation to him*.”<sup>51</sup> In addition to the names listed above, this personalistic view is well grounded in Augustine<sup>52</sup> and shared by, for example, Emil Brunner<sup>53</sup> and Joseph Ratzinger,<sup>54</sup> two theologians to whom Thielicke generally—in spite of their differing confessional affiliations—considers himself close. Thielicke and Brunner, by the way, besides theological affinity,<sup>55</sup>

46. *EvF III*, 57. See Luther’s explanation of thesis 28 as rendered in Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 214: “For sinners are beautiful because they are loved; they are not loved because they are beautiful.” See further *The II/1*, §1679; *The III*, §1866, 2082; *GldChr*, 129; *Tod*, 205; *Lebensangst*, 53; *Fragen*, 253; *Ernstfall*, 45, 60; *Nihilismus*, 131; and *Welt*, 109–10.

47. See *The I*, §459–61; §823–25; *MF&T*, 487; and *Mensch*, 151, 159. Gloege, “Personalismus,” 26–29, highlights both as representatives of a “rational” (Pascal) and “categorical personalism” (Kierkegaard).

48. Althaus, *Luther*, 227. “Righteousness comes to a man from outside himself and is not a quality of his heart” (Althaus, *Luther*, 229). See the whole subsection: “Alien Righteousness,” in Althaus, *Luther*, 227–33, for further unfolding.

49. *EvF I*, 15. See also *EvF I*, 172, 224–25, where he compliments the death-of-God theologians for bringing the specific concept of a “God of the theistic tradition” to an end. See *EvF II*, 99.

50. *EvF I*, 167–68. See *EvF I*, 15–16, 40, 49. Yet, likewise, “one cannot talk about God without the world being present in some way” (*EvF II*, 128).

51. *EvF I*, 15. Emphasis added. See *The II/1*, §1587; *Gebet*, 111; *K&K*, 16–17 [*B&E*, 15]; *Freiheit*, 25. See Althaus’s rendering of Luther in *Luther*, 10: “We men can know our essential nature only when we view ourselves ‘in our source, that is, in God.’” See also Bromiley, “Thielicke,” 548.

52. See *Mensch*, 394; *Wayfarer*, 78 [106–7].

53. “Man is only truly human when he is in God. Then, and then only, is he truly ‘himself’” (Brunner, *Dogmatics II*, 58). Barth agrees: “True man . . . exists not in his independence but in his union with the one true God” (Barth, *Introduction*, 202).

54. “Man only knows himself if he learns to understand himself in relation to God, and he only knows fellow man if he recognizes God’s secret in him” (Ratzinger, *Jesus I*, 327).

55. For instance, Nordlander, relying on the work of Roessler, *Person und Glaube*, points out that Thielicke shows close affinity to the basic existential-ontological



also got along well on a personal level, the latter thereby prospering on the basis of the former, a fact testified to by a warm-hearted correspondence.<sup>56</sup>

It follows that “the question ‘Who am I?’ can be answered adequately and appropriately only when I speak of God as the author of my life history . . . so that one certainly must start not with speaking about him, but to him, must start with answering him.”<sup>57</sup> The theological task thereby *follows* as a response to the divine address, which in turn determines one’s existence.

What, therefore, according to Luther, makes one a theologian? Human nature! For every human being is already a theologian simply by virtue of man’s capacity to ask himself the question “Who am I?”—which must be answered either in relation to God or without God, but always in the presence of God, i.e., *coram Deo*.<sup>58</sup> Accordingly, Thieliicke, in truly Lutheran fashion, replies to the question of identity: “Who am I? . . . I am the man I am before God. My form of being is thus expressed in a relation. I am the one who is taken up into this relation.”<sup>59</sup>

That is why, for Thieliicke, man is “incurably religious,”<sup>60</sup> and why he considers atheism akin to faith.<sup>61</sup> What then, according to Luther, makes one a *Christian* theologian? Answer: the affirmative response to God’s ad-

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structure of Brunner. In Brunner, all forms of personal thinking show five essential features: personality, relation, actuality, verbal capacity [*Verbalität*], and dialectic. They present the formal terms by which Brunner describes the indicative [*Wirklichkeitsform*] of the divine-human relation. See Nordlander, *Gottebenbildlichkeit*, 30–31, 43, 190n17, 195–96n86. Gloege, “Personalismus,” 32–33, highlights three basic elements of personal thinking: subjectivity (or: personality), relation, and actuality.

56. See, for example, Brunner’s letters to Thieliicke on September 25, 1947 (*NHT*); July 25, 1964 (*NHT*).

57. Bayer, *Luther’s Theology*, 16.

58. Bayer, *Luther’s Theology*, chapter 1, “Every Person is a Theologian: Luther’s Understanding of Theology,” esp. 15–17. See also Ebeling: “The fundamental situation of the *coram*-relationship is existence *coram Deo*” (Ebeling, *Luther*, 199).

59. *EvF I*, 189.

60. *EvF III*, 335. According to Pannenberg: “For the pioneers of modern secular culture in the seventeenth-century religion . . . was a part of human nature” (Pannenberg, *Christentum in einer säkularisierten Welt*, 26). Similarly, Martin Heidegger, just like one of his theological interpreters, Macquarrie, *Heidegger*, 60, is convinced that “no man is without religion.” See Heidegger, “Martin Heidegger: Ein Porträt,” (25:08).

61. One of the world’s leading scientists, Francis S. Collins, intensifies Thieliicke’s point made in *Fragen*, 32–33, and calls atheism “a form of blind faith” as “it adopts a belief system that cannot be defended on the basis of pure reason” (Collins, *Language of God*, 165). For Thieliicke’s view, see *EvF I*, 233, 249; *EvF II*, 292; *Anfechtung*, 256; and *Mensch*, 48–49, 317. Within the context of discussing Bonhoeffer’s notion of “religionless Christianity” in “EdR,” 75, Thieliicke reasserts that “I can never break out of my ontic God-relationship,” but submits, however, that it remains questionable to define man’s negative relationship to God as “religion,” for then the term “religionlessness” [*Religionslosigkeit*] would become absurd.

dress and promise.<sup>62</sup> This reply, which will be taken up again in the following subsection, already anticipates the concern of chapter 8, viz., the theological grounding of Thielicke's prioritizing of proclamation over theology. Like Luther, he is convinced that "the creed needs to come after its gospel preamble and must be related to it."<sup>63</sup> In any case, just as every human being is a theologian, every person putting his sole hope and trust in Christ is a *Christian* theologian, for "faith causes one to reflect: not only the professional theologian."<sup>64</sup>

### Part Two: The Lutheran Touchstone of *tentatio* —Encountering Christ Personally via Suffering

In light of this, Luther's answer to the second question of the nature of theology becomes clear. According to Bayer, Luther's famous three rules for studying theology, *oratio* (prayer), *meditatio* (meditation on the text), and *tentatio* (agonizing struggle) not only take "into account the historical nature of theological existence," but also give "due recognition to the fundamental importance of temptation (*tentatio*)."<sup>65</sup> Hence, in the eyes of the Reformer, the subject of theology naturally includes "the one who does theology"—as Thielicke himself makes clear.<sup>66</sup> Whereas Thielicke's application of Luther's *oratio* and *meditatio* will be returned to below, explicit focus must now shift to the outworking of the "touchstone"<sup>67</sup> of the tripartite rule in Thielicke's life, namely, *tentatio*.

Luther's favored German translation for this Latin term is *Anfechtung*, finding its English equivalent in a number of possibilities such as temptation, trial, test, contestation, or—as used by Bayer—agonizing struggle or spiritual attack.<sup>68</sup> As such, it is the deepest existential, practical expression of Luther's *theologia crucis*, playing itself out in the life of the followers

62. For Barth, likewise, "Faith is the *conditio sine qua non*, the indispensable condition of theological science. . . . Without this event, a man . . . cannot become and be a theologian" (Barth, *Introduction*, 100).

63. Bayer, *Luther's Theology*, 15. Again, Barth agrees: "Without the *precedence* of the creative Word, there can be not only no proper theology but, in fact, no evangelical theology at all!" (Barth, *Introduction*, 18).

64. Bayer, *Luther's Theology*, 16. See also Bayer, *Lutheran Way*, 83, 212.

65. Bayer, *Lutheran Way*, 34.

66. *EvF I*, 15n2.

67. Bayer, *Luther's Theology*, 35.

68. For "spiritual attack," see *Lutheran Way*, 96, 212. The Greek root for all these equivalents is *πειρασμός* (*peirasmos*). See Bayer, *Luther's Theology*, 20; and Vine, *Expository Dictionary*, 1129. For an analysis of Luther's usage of *Anfechtung*, see Rieger, *Luthers theologische Grundbegriffe*, 21–23.

of Christ.<sup>69</sup> Luther's "theology of the cross" thereby does not denote one theological aspect amongst others, but determines the very being, nature, essence, *Wesen* of Christian theology.<sup>70</sup> It is *the* theology of the cross, or it is nothing.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, what appears to be the most pressing point regarding the present Thielickean context is best outlined by Paul Althaus:

Luther's statement "God is known only in suffering" . . . points to the deep correlation between the suffering Christ . . . and *the suffering man, who is the only man able to enter into community with God*. Luther's transition from the cross of Christ to the suffering of the Christian . . . means that the knowledge of God is not theoretical knowledge but rather a matter of man's entire existence. We cannot view the cross as an objective reality in Christ without at once knowing ourselves as crucified with Christ. The cross means: *God meets us . . . in the death of Christ, but only when we experience Christ's death as our own death. . . . Contemplating the death of Christ necessarily becomes a dying together with him.*<sup>72</sup>

In recalling Thielicke's very own experience, it looks like an existential realization of Althaus's words, almost serving as a blueprint for Thielicke: "That evening, I bid farewell to my life. I sat there gazing constantly at the crucifix opposite my bed."<sup>73</sup> Likewise: "The night I took the medicine I kind of set my life in order. I prayed. In my [hospital] room hung a crucifix. . . . In the face of the crucified, I thought of the forgiveness of sins, simply to straighten my life out."<sup>74</sup>

Thielicke, as a "suffering man," was enabled that night "to enter into community with God." In "contemplating the death of Christ," Thielicke "died together with him." By experiencing "Christ's death as [his] own death," he met God. Thus, Thielicke underwent precisely what Lutheran theologian, Werner Thiede, encapsulates as follows: "Anyone who meditates on the cross discovers his own death in it."<sup>75</sup> Via this personal encounter with the divine, Thielicke experienced that above-mentioned

69. See Althaus, *Luther*, 33. For Thielicke's systematic reflections on the cross, see chapter 7.

70. See Ebeling, "Todes Tod," 32; Wengert, "Peace, Peace," 190–91.

71. Helpful publications on Luther's *theologia crucis* are Althaus, *Luther*, chapter 5; Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*; and McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*.

72. Althaus, *Luther*, 28. Emphasis added. In passing, the emphasis "that the knowledge of God is not theoretical knowledge" but transforming, existential knowledge is also laid by Ratzinger, *Jesus I*, 232, as well as Brunner, *Divine-Human Encounter*, 139.

73. *Wayfarer*, 65 [89].

74. *Krauss*, 22–23.

75. Thiede, *Gekreuzigte[r] Sinn*, 195.

Lutheran transition from being merely “a theologian” to becoming “a *Christian* theologian.” This comparison between Thielicke’s actual experience and the delineation of Luther’s thought by his fatherly friend and former supervisor, Althaus, is rounded off well by Thielicke reporting that he was allowed to take the crucifix in his hospital room home after his recovery and henceforth had it placed above his office desk.<sup>76</sup>

Luther’s experiential understanding of the coming to and meaning of faith, however, deserves yet another look, thereby further revealing the closeness between Thielicke’s concrete experience and his confessional patron’s thoughts. Althaus states that “the cross makes itself available only to experience; more accurately: only to the suffering of God prepared by him for us through and with Christ.”<sup>77</sup> Althaus herein emphasizes two components likewise strongly surfacing in Thielicke’s decisive four-year episode of illness—namely, the already-mentioned *experience* and *passivity*. While Wengert qualifies the first, saying that “it is not any old experience that makes a theologian, but precisely the experience of having been stretched out on Christ’s cross,”<sup>78</sup> Bayer connects both aspects, emphasizing Luther’s understanding of faith as *vita passiva*: “Theology is practical in the sense that it is an experience. . . . In this experience, God is the active subject. He works at shaping and molding us. And we are the passive recipients who ‘suffer,’ who undergo his work. For that reason, Luther calls theology the receptive life (*vita passiva*).”<sup>79</sup>

Bayer’s further elaboration on this elsewhere draws out the existential parallel to Thielicke even more clearly:

The decisive aspect of the *vita passiva* is that it is linked to a specific experience: to an experience for which I am not the prime initiator, but which instead I suffer: “He becomes a theologian . . . in that he dies and delivers himself to hell, not in that he knows, reads, or speculates.” The righteousness of faith is passive, . . . “we ourselves . . . do not do anything.” . . . Faith is thus the work of God, . . . it can only be received and suffered. . . . We

76. See *Wayfarer*, 65 [89]; *Krauss*, 22–23.

77. Althaus, *Luther*, 28.

78. Wengert, “Peace, Peace,” 196. Bayer, *Luther’s Theology*, 21–22, 37, however, favors a wider interpretation. In his eyes, the term “does not advocate . . . some principle of pure experience, which could offer instead the principle of some indeterminate openness and openendedness. It is not experience as such that makes the theologian a theologian, but rather experiencing Holy Scripture.”

79. Bayer, *Lutheran Way*, 96. See also the work of Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, as well as Rieger, *Luthers theologische Grundbegriffe*, 23, who renders Luther’s words: “Whoever experiences fear and vileness and in this process becomes a new man: just keep still and let God have his way; he will do it well without any human help.”

can only receive it. We do nothing, but instead suffer its coming from another, who works in us: God.<sup>80</sup>

Once more, the similarity to Thieliicke's "specific experience" on Maundy Thursday, 1933, is striking. He was not the "prime initiator"; on the contrary, he "received and suffered passively." It is certainly no coincidence that later, during the war, Thieliicke reminded his listeners in a bombed out *Stiftskirche* in Stuttgart that "*God is suffered. We have to suffer God.*"<sup>81</sup> He further "died"—as already shown above—a soulish death by giving himself up (or, in Bayer's words, by "delivering himself to hell"). His "way to faith was not destined by theoretical considerations," not by knowing, reading, or speculating, "but by the superior power of this event," thus, by what Luther terms *vita passiva*. Yet, while Bayer footnotes that here "Luther is clearly exaggerating, for he does not want to exclude knowing and reading,"<sup>82</sup> Thieliicke, at least in the literal formulation of his principle, seems to reject both in this process when he declares in 1943: "How little can one be taught by theological thoughts! God has to put you into the eschatological life in order to realize at last with thirty-four years and as an 'old theologian' that it is about life and not about thoughts."<sup>83</sup> At any rate, Wengert's emphasis, that according to the theology of the cross "the sufferer . . . driven by suffering, comes to the realization . . . of [his] true neediness,"<sup>84</sup> fully applies to Thieliicke himself.

Finally, just as "the reformational turning point in Luther's own life and theology did not happen all at once . . . [but] instead . . . happened in the midst of 'meditating day and night,'"<sup>85</sup> so it can be said that Thieliicke's existential turnaround must not be reduced to the final climactic events of Maundy Thursday (him sorting his life out) and Good Friday (his miraculous recovery). Rather, by recalling von Hildebrand's distinction outlined in chapter 2, part two, the whole four-year period of

80. Bayer, *Luther's Theology*, 42–43. See Ebeling, *Luther*, 200. For the passive process of justification, see Althaus, *Luther*, 228; and Adam, *Dogmengeschichte*, 155–56, who contrasts Luther's passive understanding of how perfection in Christ is to be achieved with Thomas à Kempis's active view.

81. *GldChr*, 140. Emphasis added. For this "crucifying form of knowledge," see Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 212; *Experiences*, 64.

82. Bayer, *Luther's Theology*, 42n34.

83. *K&K*, 34 [*B&E*, 30–31]. Obviously, at that moment, it does not appear to Thieliicke that the latter might be an inseparable part of the former, i.e., Thieliicke writes as though no (theological) thought were required to arrive at such a conclusion.

84. Wengert, "Peace, Peace," 205.

85. Bayer, *Luther's Theology*, 22.

Thielicke's "sickness-unto-death"—including going through severe theological crises<sup>86</sup> as well as fighting through his dissertation in the midst of great agony—came to be not only the period in which he acquired a fully conscious understanding of the phenomenon of death. In fact, in light of the *vita passiva*, it might now also be regarded as Thielicke being led to his personal encounter with Christ via passive suffering. It was "the way of suffering" through which he endured God's work in him. He was thus shaped and molded in order to arrive at the great soteriological insight, namely, "the one thing essential [which] *must convey itself to me in its essentiality*," as he himself states in one of his last books.<sup>87</sup>

Before this background, the already-quoted and profound analysis of his friend and former student, Röhricht, gains additional weight. It is worth recalling that, according to Röhricht, one of two ways into Thielicke "is the way of suffering which, physically and mentally, scarred him for life. He talked little about this . . . but his theology was also a *pathei mathos*, a learning in suffering. . . . This was experience."<sup>88</sup>

Thus, Althaus's Lutheran recognition that "all men, including the Christian, must endure before the miracle of faith can occur,"<sup>89</sup> indeed, that "the theology of the cross views man as one who has been *called to suffer*,"<sup>90</sup> could probably not be more applicable than in the case of Thielicke's coming to faith. Wengert fittingly summarizes the Lutheran understanding of suffering as "God's alien work, opposed to God's very nature," within which Thielicke's experience precisely must be located:

The cross reveals that the senseless suffering of this sorry existence has a point in God, and that this point is penultimate—God's first, alien work that clears the way in us for God's proper work of salvation. Thus, the cross reveals human suffering for what it truly is—a curse—and thereby opens us up to receive God's own, proper work and blessing in the resurrection.<sup>91</sup>

This theological interpretation seems rather appropriate in the case of Thielicke, especially in recalling his own words that the time of sickness and almost certain death did not let him find faith at first (it was a "curse," and

86. See *Kanzel*, 63.

87. *Suche*, 150. Although I am not aware of such an assessment by Thielicke, he might even have been able to see death, just like Luther, as "a father's rod used to punish his child" (Luther cited in Althaus, *Luther*, 407).

88. Röhricht, "Thielicke," 27. The other way is "the way of friendship."

89. Althaus, *Luther*, 31.

90. Althaus, *Luther*, 27. Emphasis added.

91. Wengert, "Peace, Peace," 200.

yet, still “God’s first, alien work that clear[ed] the way in [him]”). Rather, “the relation to faith came . . . when I was healed after a number of years . . . ”<sup>92</sup> (“God’s own proper work . . . in the resurrection”). In light of this, it might not come as a coincidence that Thielicke himself called his miraculous recovery on Good Friday, 1933, a “resurrection.” For with Luther, Thielicke can say: “Hitherto, I have heard that Christ is my Savior . . . Now my experience bears this out. For I was often in the agony of death and in the bonds of the devil, but He rescued me and manifested Himself.”<sup>93</sup>

It was the purpose of this chapter to show the truly Lutheran embeddedness of Thielicke’s “sickness-unto-death.” To unfold a first major systematic theological consequence of it—namely, that Thielicke, like Luther, considers theology to be “identical with faith”<sup>94</sup>—will be the aim of the next.

92. Krauss, 17.

93. Luther cited in Althaus, *Luther*, 62n59.

94. Bayer, *Lutheran Way*, 93.