

Foreword by Timothy J. Wengert

MARTIN LUTHER ONCE NOTED that experience makes a theologian. This trenchant remark is the guide through which Dr. Grassl has viewed the life and work of one of the most important and yet (now) least known German theologians of the twentieth century.

I first learned about Helmut Thielicke and his remarkable sermons as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan—active in the Lutheran student congregation—an interest that continued through my years at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Now, over four decades later, few Lutherans, let alone other Protestants or Roman Catholics, have even heard the name, let alone read anything by this remarkable twentieth-century theologian. Yet Helmut Thielicke, alongside other far-better-known German theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Karl Barth, demands attention, especially for the unique way he blended theology, proclamation, and life. That is the unique contribution of Grassl's book: an analysis of Thielicke's theology and proclamation from the perspective of his life, especially his personal experiences of death (between the late 1920s and 1933) and living in a culture of death (from 1933 to 1945).

By grounding Thielicke's work in his life, Grassl has found a way to give new perspectives on this remarkable theologian and preacher of the 1930s through the 1960s. Reading this careful study ought to motivate every reader at very least to purchase and devour Thielicke's sermons (about which he once said that his translator, John W. Doberstein, made them better in English than in the original German). But Grassl has also done a great service to theology by bringing this highly contextual theologian back to life, thus making a plea for the preeminence of truly existential theology in the Christian church.

In a world where autocrats abound, Thielicke's down-to-earth theology may prove to be the perfect antidote. In any case, from this book, we learn that experience made Thielicke one of the very best theologians of all.

Timothy J. Wengert

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Foreword by Wolfram Thielicke

QUITE SOME TIME HAS passed since the death of my father and no one talks about him much anymore. All the greater my surprise and joy when Fabian Grassl got in touch with me one day to find out more about Helmut Thielicke for the purposes of his dissertation. We invited him and his wife, Anja, to our home and spent a lovely and cheerful afternoon together. I was staggered by the knowledge he had acquired about Helmut Thielicke. As a passionate technician who studied mechanical engineering, I could not contribute much to theological subjects, but that was not Grassl's concern anyway: he was rather interested in my relationship with my father.

Our upbringing was very important to my father, but his work made such demands on him that he mainly left it to our mother. Being in the public eye as he was, my poor school performance certainly proved challenging to him. But his distinct humor helped him to make the best of this, too: during a conversation with colleagues and their wives, the topic of their children's school achievements came up. One mother praised the prodigies of her offspring and their excellent school reports. At that, my father responded dryly: "If one of our children comes home with a 'D' in their school report, we hoist the colors."

As his son, I especially liked that he was not afraid of his superiors. He met every traffic policeman with respect, but not "authorities" such as the Gestapo in the Third Reich, who terrorized him greatly. I miss my father's courageous statements on current political affairs and ethical issues, statements that often got him into trouble. What, for example, would he say about the whole process of digitization, with all of its positive and negative consequences? In his day, a quip circulated about my dad that said: "The Last Judgement will arrive so fast that not even Helmut Thielicke could say anything about it."

At any rate, I am pleased about this work: that my father lives on; and not least about the friendship with Fabian and Anja Grassl that has come out of it.

Wolfram Thielicke

Nuremberg, March 2018

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