Human Relationality and Our Identity in Christ: Helmut Thielicke’s Theological Anthropology for the *Sitz im Leben*

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Trinity College
and the Theological Department of the Toronto School of Theology
In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Theology awarded by Trinity College and the University of Toronto

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For the German theologian Helmut Thielicke (1908-1986), theology must engage contemporary culture’s challenges. While the divine Word creates and maintains the reality of the human (and is essential to the profoundest understanding of the human), situation-specific challenges require specific applications of the Gospel. Thielicke’s theological anthropology exemplifies this approach: it confronts his culture’s existential concerns with a particular articulation of God’s “many-splendored” grace. To the postwar Germans anxious over identity and meaning, Thielicke proclaimed that humanity, created in God’s image and appointed to a divine relationship, is reconciled by Christ. Although immanent, penultimate relations defined and controlled the human person in popular understanding, Thielicke contended it is the person’s transcendent, definitive relation to God in Christ that constitutes true being. Thielicke’s theological approach and his Christological-relational anthropology remain pertinent today.
Although Thielicke observed idiosyncratic expressions of existential concerns, those concerns are perennial. They are grounded in humanity’s universal sinful condition.
I am thankful for the guidance and encouragement of my thesis supervisor, Dr. Victor Shepherd. Dr. Shepherd always sought both my intellectual development and my spiritual well-being. His profound knowledge, perceptive insight, and pastoral counsel make him a true “modern day Thielicke.” I also wish to acknowledge my thesis readers: Dr. David Neelands of Trinity College and Dr. Ephraim Radner of Wycliffe College. Their observations and remarks have sharpened my thinking and spurred me to further study Thielicke’s thought. Like Dr. Shepherd, they each possess a most learned mind and a warm pastoral heart, and I very much appreciate that each has shared them with me. I am also indebted to my friend Doug Ball. Doug was an encouraging voice while providing unvarnished critique. His wise and witty counsel, whether over a coffee or a Martini, always reflected his respect and affection.

In embarking on this particular path, as in all my paths before, I am truly grateful for the steadfast love and faithful prayer of my parents, Elisabeth and Hubert Lack. Each of them left Germany to start a new life in Canada around the time Thielicke was in Hamburg proclaiming that our identity lies in Christ Jesus. Although they never heard Thielicke preach, Elisabeth and Hubert, each in their own way, have always witnessed that grace to me. God bless you Mom and Dad and know that God has blessed me through you.
Finally, I am most thankful for my wife, Janet, whose love toward me and love of her Lord and Saviour is of constant comfort to me. She has been a most wonderful and loyal companion on this journey, as she has been throughout our life together. Thanks be to God for you, Janet.
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Chapter 1

“No Perennial Theology”

1.1 Prolegomenon

Helmut Thielicke (1908-1986) was a profound Christian theologian and ethicist, and yet when his name is mentioned in less theologically informed circles he is often confused with his contemporary, Paul Tillich. There is likely more to this lack of recognition than just the similarity of their surnames because Thielicke also stands in the shadows of other 20th century German theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg. As a result, and rather unfortunately, Thielicke the theologian is underrated and under-read.¹ What is not underrated or under-read is Thielicke the preacher. While no less able academically than the aforementioned thinkers, he, unlike them, was also a most popular and powerful preacher. What made Thielicke the theologian so popular in the pulpit? Perhaps it was because he was able to proclaim the Christian faith in a manner that spoke to the generation of disillusioned and disenfranchised Germans emerging from the devastation of World War II. Although intellectually prominent and culturally sophisticated, Thielicke was also a caring pastor who had the ability to engage with ordinary folk. This made him unique among his theological peers. So popular were his sermons

¹ Pless too acknowledges that Thielicke’s theological work is largely ignored today. He observes that Thielicke is not mentioned at all in Hans Schwarz’s Theology in a Global Context: The Last Two Hundred Years or in Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson’s A Map of Twentieth Century Theology. John T. Pless, “Helmut Thielicke (1908-1986),” Lutheran Quarterly XXIII (2009): 439-464. Thielicke is also not cited in Stanley J. Grenz’s and Roger E. Olson’s 20th Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age.
that during the 1950s and 60s the pews of the 3,000-seat St. Michaelis Cathedral in largely secular Hamburg were filled for his two Sunday services. And it was a diverse crowd that came to hear the scholar preach. In addition to the life-long Lutherans in attendance, there were also skeptics and seekers. In the pews of the port city church, shipping magnates sat next to dock workers, pious widows next to prostitutes.

However varied the economic, social, and religious background of the parishioners may have been, Thielicke observed that they had common concerns. The theologian/preacher looked upon Germany’s war-ravaged psyche and saw people struggling with anxiety, insecurity, and identity. This thesis will consider how Thielicke spoke to these modern concerns (or more exactly the modern expression of these perennial concerns) by focusing on the eternal truth and hope of Jesus Christ: in particular how he insisted that human identity lies in Him, not in one’s use to society or one’s place in its structures. Thielicke’s proclamation of this expression or aspect of God’s grace addressed issues that extended well beyond the walls of St. Michaelis and the borders of Germany. The existential anxieties that he observed stemmed from the underlying universal condition of human sin. Consequently Thielicke’s message would find a worldwide audience in his era, and it has the potential to do so again today.

1.2 Theology – Contemporary Concerns and the Eternal Gospel

In the prolegomena to *The Evangelical Faith*, his systematic theology, Thielicke observes that every era undergoes different challenges to faith, each demanding “a new point in preaching and
For Thielicke, theology must face and respond to the concerns and challenges of contemporary society. He maintains there is “no perennial theology” that can stand detached from the current age, but rather “every theology lives and thinks in the correlation of challenge and response.”

The history of theology is the history of various attempts at finding relevant responses to address changing concerns or changing expressions of perennial concerns.

According to Thielicke, the truth of the Christian faith provides the most effective response to the queries of his era because it addresses human existence and its real-life challenges: “it applies to [the person] unconditionally… in his concreteness.”

He contends that the fundamental substance of a Scripturally-informed theology always must be maintained, but it is also essential that the inquirer’s specific concern be considered. Thus in post World War II Germany Thielicke spoke to the modern challenges he observed by shining a light on the eternal biblical truths and in so doing making apparent “new applications [of those truths]… that were previously hidden.”

Thielicke recognizes that modern questions and concerns often call for different facets of the faith to be emphasized or highlighted. But while such contemporary queries “can have a constructive effect and release new theological aspects… [or] insights”, he insists that the eternal Word of God is never to be compromised.

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3 Ibid., 368, 29.
4 Ibid., 25.
5 Ibid., 24-5.
6 Ibid., 120.
7 Ibid., 26.
1.2.1 Accommodation and Actualization

Thielicke distinguishes between a theology that accommodates the Gospel to contemporary challenges and a theology that “actualizes” it. He acknowledges that although on the surface the two approaches may appear identical, “i.e., variant forms of one and the same process of modernization”, they are fundamentally not.\(^8\) The former manipulates the biblical truth by accommodating it to meet the questions, needs, and understandings of a modern, autonomous humanity. It is “made-to-measure religion.”\(^9\) An accommodating approach does not focus on the message but rather on how that message is apprehended. It uses experience, feelings, and reason as the starting points and norms in appropriating the Christian faith. Thielicke, however, considers that by basing acceptance of the faith on these human elements of understanding “theology [was] reduced to a mere chapter in anthropology.”\(^10\)

An “actualizing” approach, too, addresses the concerns of contemporary culture but, in contrast to accomodation, it remains faithful to the Gospel. Thielicke recognizes that the Word of God was all-encompassing and sufficient to meet even the ever-varying needs of the modern listener. And it needed to be. Although eternal and unaltered, the Gospel needs to be nimble enough to “continually be forwarded to a new address, because the recipient is repeatedly changing his

\(^8\) Ibid., 27.
\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^10\) Ibid., 53. In fact, Thielicke, argues that it is God who already has accommodated Himself to humanity and its understandings. God condescended and disclosed Himself to the world and its “carnal concepts” in the incarnation of the Word. Ibid., 368.
place of residence.” Actualization, therefore, presents the truth of the Christian message in a contemporary way without compromising its integrity or diminishing its authority. Thielicke views the confessions of the early church as a model of such an approach; they upheld the Scriptural truth but “re-addressed” it in response to the era’s challenges. Actualization does not ignore the human elements of appropriation, such as rational thought, but it does dispute the normative rank that accommodation has accorded them. The distinction between an accommodating theology and an actualizing one was crucial for Thielicke, who always employed the latter.

1.2.2 Tillich’s Method of Correlation

Thielicke’s approach to theology may seem similar to Paul Tillich’s “method of correlation,” but Thielicke recognized that there were differences. Tillich, like Thielicke, sought to provide a theological response to the ontological questions and existential concerns that he had observed in mid-20th century society. But unlike Thielicke, who sought not to accommodate the Christian truth to contemporary culture, Tillich, in attempting to correlate the two, allowed the culture’s questions and his own philosophical suppositions to control the biblical answer. As a result, Tillich often obscured or altered the content of divine revelation, an action which understandably would undermine Scripture’s authority. As the theologian Kenneth M. Hamilton observes, in the method of correlation the content of the Gospel is not allowed to speak its own word; its role is

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13 Ibid., 214.
merely to provide answers to questions that have the required answer already in mind. Thus, with Tillich’s approach the Gospel is “a prisoner in the power of an inquisitor.”

Thielicke understood what Tillich was attempting to do. He acknowledges that the goal of Tillich’s theology was apologetic and, specifically, to aid those in existential crisis. Thus, Thielicke considers that with his method of correlation Tillich was “on the right track.” Thielicke’s assessment may have been more charitable than that of Hamilton or of those who have described Tillich’s method of correlation as “a sophisticated form of the ‘Procrustean bed syndrome’.” Nevertheless, Thielicke maintains that “while the present situation and its question have to be considered, they must not become a normative principle nor must they be allowed to prejudice the answer; they must be constantly recast and transcended in encounter with the text.”

1.2.3 Recast Questions

Thielicke recognizes that humanity’s questions can provide the occasion for a theological response, but they cannot govern the response. Rather it is the response that controls the question.

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14 Kenneth M. Hamilton, *The System and the Gospel: A Critique of Paul Tillich* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 121. Hamilton felt that the method of correlation did not deserve its name because the term “correlation” suggested equality which he believed was not reflected in the method. Instead, Hamilton considered Tillich’s approach to be a “process of subordination” because the answer provided by the Christian faith is subordinated to the question put forth by the culture. Ibid.


17 Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith: Volume I*, 127. Thielicke always maintained a deep respect for Tillich and the two shared a close friendship. The appendix to Thielicke’s *Modern Faith and Thought*, (trans. G.W. Bromiley Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990) contains the address that Thielicke gave honouring Tillich on the latter’s receiving the Hanseatic Goethe Prize in 1958. Tillich was often a guest lecturer on Thielicke’s faculty at the University of Hamburg and once they even traded classrooms with Tillich taking Thielicke’s semester at Hamburg and Thielicke taking Tillich’s at the University of Chicago.
by recasting it in light of the divine word. It is the Gospel that sheds a “new and surprising light” on the question, rearticulating it and posing it back to the inquirer.\(^\text{18}\) The concept of a recast or counter-question informed by biblical truth was prominent in Thielicke’s theological approach. He held that the dialectic approach acquaints the inquirer with the underlying, real issue to which the Gospel is then applied.\(^\text{19}\) Humanity was transcendently oriented and as a result its existential questions were really about God; they were “latent religious question[s]” that needed to be deciphered.\(^\text{20}\)

Thielicke observed that the recast question was the approach Jesus customarily used in his dialogue with those who brought questions to Him.\(^\text{21}\) Jesus does not answer the posed question, but rather responds by recasting it and thereby identifying the inquirer’s true concern. Jesus recognized that beneath a person’s surficial concerns lay a deeper issue that reflected one’s alienation from God. Thielicke observed this tactic in Jesus’ conversation with rich young ruler (Mt 19:16ff, Mk 10:17ff, Lk 18:18ff): the man in asking about eternal life is really seeking a relationship with God.\(^\text{22}\) In a sermon entitled, *What Has God Got to Do with the Meaning of Life?*\(^\text{23}\) Thielicke translates the young man’s question as, “What is the meaning of life?” or “What is the goal of my life?” By all appearances the young man has attained it all, and yet he is unfulfilled; he is bored. The man recognizes that something is missing, and so “he asks about the


\(^{\text{19}}\) Although the recast question is key to his own theological approach, Thielicke considered it to be muted in Tillich’s method. See Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith: Volume I*, 24f.


\(^{\text{22}}\) Ibid., 162.

design of creation which he has discarded and the prescribed identity which he has failed to win.” Like Jesus, Thielicke saw that beneath humanity’s patent yearnings and existential concerns there lies a latent religious question. It was these existential concerns that Thielicke sought to address with one particular expression of God’s grace.

1.2.4 The Spotlight Approach – Applying One Expression of God’s Grace

For Thielicke, the divine Word is the normative principle of and essential to understanding human reality; nevertheless, to address modern challenges sometimes a shift in emphasis or a specific application of the truth is required. To speak to a particular question the theological task involves identifying the appropriate response from the vast array of theological truth. Thielicke recognized this selective approach at work in Luther who “spotlighted” the theme of justification by faith alone to answer the central question of his era. Thielicke adopted a similar approach that spotlighted a particular truth to meet a correlative concern while leaving other truths for another day.

The consequences of not applying the spotlight approach, particularly in the pulpit, were obvious to Thielicke, and are illustrated with the following anecdote from his ministry. Thielicke was always wary of a sermon’s potential to overload the listener. He had taken to heart the concern of one young listener who had complained about being overwhelmed by the multiple truths of Scripture. The young man felt as if he had been blinded by a 1000 watt lamp. All he wanted, and

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25 Ibid., 122.
all he could handle, was one truth, “just one candle, one single candle.” Thielicke believed that preachers often fear saying too little but he realized that often ‘less is more’. Like a captivating portrait, preaching “the gospel requires the art of omission, or at least a distinction between what is to be sketched and what is to be drawn fully.” Thus in his own preaching Thielicke did not worry about not touching on every truth in a sermon because he knew that all of the truths of the Christian faith and the Gospel message are implicit in the one core truth for that day.

Thielicke used this same overall approach of spotlighting theological truths in his explication that God’s grace, the “eternal” gospel, addressed as nothing else could the “temporal” situation of the German hearer. God’s grace is unvarying but rich in variety; it is a multi-faceted diamond. Thielicke observed that a Christian’s faith can “experience many surprises… [and] many new things. But these will only be a new side of one and the same Lord.” A theology that actualizes the biblical truth can spotlight the particular aspect or expression in which grace addresses a particular contemporary need. Divine grace is a “many-splendored” thing (1 Pet 4:10), but theology finds the one articulation, or the one single candle, needed for that day. Pless echoes this understanding when he relates that theology involves the “recovery of a treasure that has been lost or endangered while at the same time clarifying what this Word means for a particular moment in history.”

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27 Ibid., 55.
29 Thielicke, Being Human... Becoming Human, 300.
30 Thielicke was well aware that God’s grace, although variegated, is singularly instantiated in Jesus Christ.
31 Pless, Lutheran Quarterly XXIII, 452.
continuous, straight-line growth in learning new truths but one of continually going back and “retrieving and rediscovering what is lost.”

1.3 Theological Anthropology – A Model for Thielicke’s Modern Theology

1.3.1 An Essential Element of Theology

For Thielicke, one aspect of God’s grace that needed to be rediscovered and proclaimed is disclosed through the discipline of theological anthropology. He contends that human identity and destiny is defined by God who is “the basis, goal and meaning” of human existence. Having been created by God in His image (Gen 1:27), appointed to a relationship with Him before the creation of the world (Eph 1:4), and then reconciled to Him through Christ (2 Cor 5:18), the human person is now hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). Theological anthropology addresses the existential questions of modern humanity, i.e. “Who am I?” and “What is the meaning of my life?” by pointing to Scripture and God’s answer: Christ. Thielicke recognizes that we may not know who we are, but God knows who we are (1 Cor 13:12), and by His gracious love He has hidden us in Himself. Employing the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, Thielicke maintains that “human personality finds its basis” in the divinely created “I-Thou” relationship, and that this bond is the “core of the biblical

32 Thielicke, The Evangelical Faith: Volume I, 123.
33 Ibid., 367.
34 Thielicke, The Hidden Question of God, 19.
message.”

Succinctly put, “Man ‘is’ his relation to God.” Consequently, Thielicke considered anthropology to be an essential element of theology.

1.3.2 Not Anthropocentric but Christocentric

Although anthropology is considered to be an essential element of theology, it is, however, not anthropocentric. The distinction is crucial. Thielicke’s anthropology, as will be presented in Chapter 3, is fundamentally Christocentric. In accordance with his “actualization” theology, Thielicke understands that theological anthropology is not governed by human autonomy or based on existential speculation. The focus and norm of reflection in theological anthropology is not the human person but rather God who is the Creator, Saviour, and Exemplar of the person. It is only because of who God is (His being) and what He does (His act) that theology involves the human. It is humanity who has been created in His image. And it is Christ who as the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15) is the true fulfilment of humanity.

Theological anthropology speaks of human identity only “in Christ.” Thielicke’s anthropology is therefore Christocentric because it is Jesus Christ who determines what humanity is. Humanity only truly knows itself in the human person present in Christ. It is “in Christ” that God takes on humanness to reveal

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37 Thielicke, Being Human... Becoming Human, 111.

Himself to humanity. This revelation occurs as Christ takes on humanity’s sin to save humanity and reconcile it for everlasting fellowship with Himself, and in doing so He reveals what authentic humanity is. The reality of Christ, His fulfilment of true humanity, and one’s fellowship with Him is then made known to the person in faith by the power of God’s Spirit. It is the Spirit who “wrests my gaze away from myself and turns it to... God.”  

There is no anthropocentrism in Thielicke’s anthropology.

The lack of anthropocentrism in Thielicke’s anthropology can be illustrated with a final point. Thielicke acknowledges that Martin Luther, in his explanation of the creation article in the Apostles’ Creed, begins not with God as the Maker of heaven and earth, but rather with “I believe that God has created me [italics mine].” He recognizes that for Luther, cosmology is not the concern, that gazing upon the stars or the trees will not point us to God in reverence or lead us to repentance. God only becomes our focus and evokes our thanksgiving and praise when we recognize that He created us, and redeemed us by Christ. Thielicke contends that the individual’s creation as part of God’s vast creation does not turn one inward, either in pride or humility, but instead turns one toward God, the source and ground of our being.

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1.3.3 Thesis – Thielicke’s Theological Anthropology Reflects His Approach to Theology

Thielicke maintained that questions about human existence and personal identity were behind “every fresh theological inquiry” as far back as Schleiermacher. He observed that questions about identity and destiny were commonplace also in his culture and needed to be addressed with the good news of God’s grace in Christ, specifically a biblically-informed theological anthropology. Upholding Philip Melanchthon’s famous maxim that to know Christ is to know His benefits, Thielicke recognized that we can only know God and speak about Him by means of His blessings vouchsafed to us in Christ. Thus to speak about God is to speak also about the human, the beneficiary of His blessings. As a result the human person, in hearing the Gospel of Christ, “does not cease to think about himself, and with good reason if [the Gospel] is filled with news that applies to him”. This news includes the announcement that the person has been defined by God and that one’s identity lies in Christ. God’s answer in Christ demonstrates that anthropology is crucial to theology. But, in addition, humanity’s questions provide a significant opportunity for that answer to be heard. Thus Thielicke’s theological anthropology is not only essential to his theology; it also reflects his overall approach to the theological task.

This thesis will argue that Thielicke’s anthropology serves as a model for his whole theological approach: it engages the challenges raised by modern culture in light of the eternal Gospel, and then responds in terms of the Gospel’s specific applicability. Thielicke’s theological

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46 Ibid., 52.
anthropology is an example of how he emphasized a specific aspect of the Gospel message to confront the existential concerns of his era. That human beings have been appointed to a relationship with God, and have an identity founded in Christ, reflects a particular expression of divine grace that Thielicke sought to declare. Thielicke’s theological approach is also reflected in his preaching of theological anthropology; he listens to the culture and responds with the biblical message in the language of the culture. This thesis will contend that the theme of theological anthropology and the preaching of it reflect Thielicke’s characteristic pastoral concern. Always a minister at heart, Thielicke sought to aid a generation of Germans anxious about issues of identity and meaning by proclaiming God’s grace in Christ.

In addition, the thesis will indicate how Thielicke’s theological anthropology remains pertinent for the 21st century. Although the idiosyncratic expressions of existential concerns observed in wartime and postwar Germany may have been particular to that time and place, at bottom those concerns are common to all humanity. They are grounded in the underlying universal condition of human sin and alienation from God. Thielicke observed that although “the far countries and pig troughs as forms of anxiety and guilt are constantly changing… they are ultimately only variations on one and the same alienation from God.”47 As a result of this universality, Thielicke’s theological anthropology can be seen to address every era. In his time, Thielicke’s sermons resonated with audiences the world over. I trust this thesis will indicate how his method and message have the power to do that today.

47 Thielicke, How Modern Should Theology Be?, 11.
1.3.4 Using a Popular Approach to Speak to the *Sitz im Leben*

To understand Helmut Thielicke’s theological anthropology and the dynamic dialectic between the existential anxieties of modern Germany and the promises proclaimed in the eternal Gospel, this study examines both his scholarly and more popular writings. Although it is in Thielicke’s *The Evangelical Faith* that he advances his argument that theology must address contemporary concerns, the theme of theological anthropology, which was essential to his theology, is not treated in detail in his systematic theology. Nor is the theme even formally discussed in that work. It is a point that has not gone unnoticed. Pless too makes the observation that a detailed discussion on theological anthropology is “strangely absent” from Thielicke’s systematic works. 48

Instead, Thielicke articulates his theological anthropology in more accessible writings: *Being Human... Becoming Human: An Essay in Christian Anthropology*, *The Hidden Question of God*, and *Nihilism: Its Origin and Nature with a Christian Answer*. Equally important to these works in addressing the topic are his sermons. Thielicke’s proclamation of the Word was the primary medium by which he addressed the concerns he observed in modern culture. The prominence of humanity’s search for identity and meaning encouraged him to address these issues in writings with a wider, more popular appeal. This approach reflected his pastoral concern. His popular

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48 Pless, *Lutheran Quarterly* XXIII, 457.
works were just that because in them his listeners and readers recognized themselves and how God was speaking to their particular concerns.\textsuperscript{49}

As will be explored in the following chapter, the horrors of the war and the postwar social, political, and economic conditions had stirred deep existential anxiety among the Germans. Thielicke believed anxiety to be “the secret wound of modern man”: the fear of life rather than fear of death being reflected in the \textit{Zeitgeist}.\textsuperscript{50} Thielicke often remarked, “You will never hear Luther’s question, ‘How can I find a gracious God?’ in a pub.” Although he observed that many of his listeners were anxious, Thielicke found that their anxiety did not reflect Luther’s own \textit{Anfectung} over sin and salvation but stemmed from the apparent absurdity of life and its meaninglessness.\textsuperscript{51} Earthly life rather than eternal life was the contemporary concern.

Thielicke contended that although existential anxiety was pervasive in the culture and proving to be a real challenge to the faith; it was a challenge that the church was not addressing. Modern humanity was “preoccupied [with itself and its] authenticity and alienation,” but the church’s proclamation was doing little to confront these concerns or to console the concerned.\textsuperscript{52} Instead, the church addressed humanity in the abstract by divorcing the person from the worldly realities.

\textsuperscript{49} Thielicke’s collections of sermons have been widely published, and along with his academic works and his more accessible writings, have been translated into English and over a dozen other languages. His sermons were particularly popular in the United States during the 1950s and 60s.


\textsuperscript{51} Tillich makes much the same point. He observes that whereas the anxiety over guilt and divine judgement was the predominant form of anxiety during the Middle Ages and in the Reformation era, the anxiety over meaninglessness reflects the modern era. Paul Tillich, \textit{The Courage to Be} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 57-8, 142. The Christian moral philosopher Charles Taylor also observes that the meaninglessness of the modern age was not a concern in previous eras. He notes: “[T]o people in Luther’s age. What worried them was, if anything, an excess of ‘meaning,’ the sense of one over-bearing issue—am I saved or damned?—which wouldn’t leave them alone.” Charles Talyor, \textit{A Secular Age} (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 303.

\textsuperscript{52} Thielicke, \textit{The Silence of God}, 52.
and relations in which one lived. As a result, listeners did not hear themselves addressed in the sermon. Thielicke recognizes that for God’s word to be heard it needs to “strike [the hearer] radically” and answer the hearer’s question: “Who am I?”.\(^{53}\) This was the question Thielicke was hearing from those in the pews and pubs of Hamburg. He had observed that most meaningful challenges to the faith arose not from within professional philosophical or theological circles but came, rather, from ordinary people sitting in those pews and pubs.\(^ {54}\) Theological work therefore was always to be carried out in conversation with the larger population in its widest diversity. Thielicke claimed that theology was always the servant of preaching and that it was through preaching and by conversing with ordinary folk that “the great theological themes begin to take shape”.\(^ {55}\)

Examples of such dialogues manifested themselves in a series of sermons Thielicke preached on the first chapters of Genesis in which he addressed the questions, “Who are we and where do we come from?” The series preached at St. Michaelis beginning in 1955 ran for two years, with each sermon often preached to over 5,000 people. Thielicke felt that the large attendance “was less a scientific curiosity [on the origin of mankind] but an existential yearning, an attempt to unravel the meaning of life.”\(^ {56}\) He contended that the Genesis stories do not address humanity’s genetic nature but rather reveal its ontic one; they “establish a specific relation of human existence, namely, its relation to the Creator.”\(^ {57}\) Thus, in response to the explicit or implicit existential

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 25.

\(^{54}\) Thielicke, *The Trouble with the Church*, 27, 32.

\(^{55}\) Thielicke, *How Modern Should Theology Be?*, 86.


\(^{57}\) Thielicke, *Being Human... Becoming Human*, 375.
problems and concerns that Thielicke heard, theological anthropology was a recurring theme in his sermons.

Thielicke recognized that theology needed to speak to the concrete reality of life and the specific situation of the individual person: what he called the *Sitz im Leben*. Although Thielicke never sought to accommodate the Gospel to the modern, rationalistic mindset (nor to the post-modern, non-rational mindset), he did contend that to speak to the concerns of modern humanity the preacher “no longer begin[s] with the dogmas and ask[s] what is their ‘Sitz im Leben’; rather [one] comes from the ‘Sitz im Leben’ and lets the Gospel speak.”

Luther’s personal *Sitz im Leben* had prompted a soteriological question for the church. In contrast, Thielicke understood that the situation in Germany during the war and the postwar years had triggered an anthropological inquiry. For Thielicke, this existential uncertainty and its accompanying anxiety demanded a theological response that, like Luther’s, could be rooted only in the Gospel of Christ. Thielicke, of course, never downplayed Scripture’s addressing of sin and guilt; he knew first and foremost that the Gospel proclaims God’s gracious act of reconciling the alienated sinner, and that the doctrine of justification is “the heart of theology.” However, he recognized that Scripture also deals with humanity’s fears and existential anxieties,

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58 *Sitz im Leben* translates roughly as “setting in life” and it was initially used in biblical criticism to understand the particular setting and function of a biblical passage. Today the term is used more often in a sociological context to describe the typical situation of a community of people. This is how Thielicke primarily employed the term. He did not so much look at the *Sitz im Leben* of the biblical text; instead he applied the term to modern German society.

59 Thielicke, *The Trouble with the Church*, 117.


that it addresses all “human possibilities and seeks out everyone in his own individual ‘far
country’.“ As such, Thielicke was well aware of God’s oft-proclaimed and comforting
command: “Fear not!” And he particularly emphasized this expression of divine grace in his
theological anthropology. However, before we consider Thielicke’s gospel-based
anthropological response we must first examine what prompted his response: the fears and
anxieties of the modern German Sitz im Leben.

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Chapter 2

The Sitz im Leben

In his sermon on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, Thielicke vividly describes how Jesus looked upon the great crowds and saw the suffering and sorrow in their eyes. He writes, that our Lord saw “the host of the miserable, the guilt-burdened, the lonely, the incurably ill, the careworn, the people who were hagridden by anxiety.”

Similar to his depiction of the scriptural account is Thielicke’s description of moments in his own ministry when he would look out at the congregation and see “on those faces the torment of doubt and despair, the hunger and thirst for solid comfort.” Elsewhere he notes that these faces were those of “distracted people whose eyes still reflect[ed] the glare of the last air-raid.” The night-time bombings and the news of loved ones killed on the Russian front were a stark reminder one’s mortality. This awareness of finitude produced an “ontological shock” that raised existential questions about the meaning of life. Similarly, the noted German historian Konrad Jarausch observes that following the war, when “hunger was rampant” and “coal and coffins” were in short supply, many Germans asked

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66 Thielicke, The Silence of God, ix. Thielicke, too, experienced firsthand the horrors of the war. During his years of ministry in Stuttgart he and his family lived among the sights and sounds and smells of destruction and decay. His own home was destroyed in the bombing as was that of his parents. His own misfortune and the many moments he shared with his parishioners in the air raid shelters established his solidarity with those he ministered to and, accordingly, contributed to his credibility in the pulpit.
themselves, “Does what remains of life have any point at all?” Such was the *Sitz im Leben* of the German people that confronted Thielicke. And it was a *Sitz im Leben* that would persist even after the horrors of war and the harsh early postwar years gave way to the relative peace and robust economy of the 1950s.

2.1 Anxiety and Nihilism

As noted here earlier, and as Thielicke covered in his popular writings and numerous sermons, the fear of life rather than the fear of death reflected the *Zeitgeist*. The theme routinely appeared in his sermons, some with such candid titles as *I Am Not Alone with My Anxiety*, *Overcoming Anxiety*, *On Being Afraid of Life*, *How Can I Keep from Being Torn up Inside?*, and *When Nothing Makes Sense*. Similar to his view of anxiety’s prevalence in the culture, Thielicke contended that nihilism—the belief that nothing matters and therefore existence has no meaning—characterized the age. Understanding nihilism to arise when we separate ourselves from our ultimate relation, God, Thielicke concluded that when this relationship is lost, the human self, who is defined by the relation, is lost. One now sees oneself merely as “an object, an

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69 A snapshot of the *Sitz im Leben* in Germany in 1962 is seen in the response to an address that Thielicke gave to the West German Parliament that year. The speech was televised to the nation and Thielicke received thousands of letters in response. The letters revealed to him the inner state of the German psyche, how the people were coping, and how they were not coping, with the threat of nuclear war but also still with the meaningless suffering of, and guilt over the Second World War. This confirmed to Thielicke the German sentiment he had been observing for years; it also provided a new source of empirical anthropological data for him to mine.

effect, a product.”\textsuperscript{71} Nihilism therefore represents not only the loss of life’s meaning but also the loss of human identity. It is this loss of identity, this obscuring of humanity’s essence that creates insecurity and expresses itself as anxiety—“a dreadful feeling of being adrift, exposed, helplessly abandoned.”\textsuperscript{72}

Feeling adrift and abandoned did not inevitably imply that anxiety manifested itself psychically. Thielicke views anxiety to be an existential state, and not necessarily an emotional one.\textsuperscript{73} As such, existential anxiety need not express itself emotionally. Thielicke contends that existential anxiety, rather than being a subjective feeling, represents an ontological condition: a broken relationship with God. Similarly, and as will be discussed in Chapter 3, existential peace as the peace between God and humanity is only achieved when the relationship is restored by Christ.

An opinion poll that Thielicke often cited appears to support the view that anxiety is an existential symptom.\textsuperscript{74} The survey, administered largely to students and young adults across the country, found that over 60 percent of them identified “anxiety” as the situation that best described their lives. Not only did the statistic astonish Thielicke but also the fact that the respondents typically gave no other suggestion of worry or depression.

Employing the existential philosopher Martin Heidegger’s understanding of anxiety, Thielicke observed that anxiety, along with not presenting an identifiable emotional response, has no identifiable external prompting. Unlike “fear” which is always the fear of something concrete and can be “defined by some disastrous incursion from the outside world”, anxiety, instead, is

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 169.
\textsuperscript{73} Thielicke, \textit{The Evangelical Faith: Volume II}, 224.
\textsuperscript{74} See for example Thielicke, \textit{The Silence of God}, 3.
produced internally; it arises from the human heart—i.e., unlike fear, anxiety has no identifiable object. 75 Although anxiety often manifests itself as a definite fear of something, Heidegger contends that it is a mood that arises from “being-in-the-world.” To this understanding Thielicke adds that anxiety includes “the totality of all the situations in which [one] finds [oneself] in this world.” 76 It is a symptom that arises when one interprets the world as meaningless and is threatened by such nothingness. As Tillich observes: anxiety’s object is “the threat itself… [it is] not the source of the threat because the source of the threat is ‘nothingness’. ” 77 Thielicke contends that such anxiety reflects a spiritual emptiness, a turning away from God.

For many at the time, this turning away was not difficult. The intense and indiscriminate suffering of the war had destroyed their faith. Others had no faith to be destroyed. Nazism’s decades-long stance against the church had ensured that many Germans had no religious affiliation or spiritual life.

It was alienation from God that for Thielicke obscured true human essence and triggered anxiety about one’s identity and life’s meaning. He further contended that these existential concerns are compounded by the same idols and ideologies that one chooses in an effort to evade the anxiety and fill the emptiness. 78 Thielicke observed that the nihilism prevalent in German society after the war was not of the “confessing” type; it was not an open allegiance to meaninglessness.

75 Thielicke, Nihilism, 125.
76 Ibid., 119.
77 Tillich, The Courage to Be, 37.
78 Thielicke, Being Human… Becoming Human, 34.
Rather, it was a “ciphered” or “camouflaged” nihilism. It was escaping the apparent nothingness of the world by being enmeshed in it.

2.2 Penultimate Relations

Thielicke understands humanity to be “enmeshed… in a web of relations.” He considers relations to be an essential feature of human identity. Personal relationships constituted the human being. Fundamentally a human is a person in relation to something outside of oneself, and through which the human comes to know oneself. The individual person does not come to know his or her existence by introspection or abstract speculation but by being in relation to “an alien element which decisively characterizes the person.” To be a personal being, an “I”, implied the existence of another personal being, a Thou/thou. As previously noted and as will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3, for Thielicke, the basis of human personality is first and foremost the transcendent relationship to God, the I-Thou, and subsequently the relationship to another human person, the I-thou.

Alien elements that characterize the person can also include impersonal entity, such as material things, a lifestyle or a philosophy—an “it”. Nevertheless, Thielicke insists that worldly relations, such as one’s job, home, possessions, social class, productivity, creativity, ideology, political party, etc., although they constitute part of one’s existence, they do not define it. However, Thielicke contended that in postwar Germany these penultimate relations had done just that;

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79 Thielicke, Nihilism, 46.
80 Thielicke, Being Human... Becoming Human, 208.
82 Thielicke, Being Human... Becoming Human, 208.
instead of contributing to one’s self identity they controlled it. Societal, political, and economic forces were “no longer clothes of [one’s] choosing but had become part of one’s skin.”

Alienated from their ultimate relation and true grounding in God (their spiritual distance bred their anxiety), people sought to find themselves—better yet, lose themselves—in the “it” relations of worldly values, structures, and ideologies. Thielicke considered such relations to be existential threats to being aware of and actualizing one’s true identity and proper destiny. Instead of helping assuage anxiety, these relations, by furthering obscuring true identity, only intensified the anxiety. Instead of filling the gap and lessening the anxiety created by the spiritual separation, they widened it.

It was a complex array of non-personal relations and phenomena that constituted the inauthentic identities and contributed to the undefined anxieties and defined fears of the German Sitz im Leben. They included: the guilt and shame over Nazism, the homelessness caused by the war, the tensions with the Soviet Union, its Marxist ideology and threat of nuclear war, the prosperity, materialism, and individualism of the Wirtschaftswunder and the rapid technological advancements that spurred it on. These relations and phenomena are detailed below.

2.2.1 The Aftermath of Nazism

The early postwar years were a time of much soul-searching in Germany as people attempted to make sense of the war and the country’s defeat. Yet as they attempted to come to grips with all the death and destruction, another shocking aspect of the war was coming to light: the torture and

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83 Thielicke, The Evangelical Faith: Volume II, 47.
murder of Jewish German citizens at the hands of the Nazis. As the true horror of the Nazi atrocities emerged many Germans experienced an identity crisis. They now no longer saw themselves as Germans; they “separate[d] themselves from their own past and cast off their identity and took on a chameleon-like search for other [ones].” Although this “casting off” and “chameleon-like search” had less to do with personal identity and, instead, more to do with national shame and collective guilt, it still caused many people to look inward. Those who did experienced the personal guilt of not having known of, or not having better heeded, the “rumours” of mass killings. There was also the guilt of those who repressed the truth. Such people experienced no “mere ‘moral’ guilt,” but one that lay “deeper and [was] more subtle.” This state reflected not a guilty feeling but the guilt that was produced by the condition of sin.

Along with the guilt of what had happened was the shock that it had happened, and that it was allowed to have happened. While some blamed the Allies and the harsh conditions of the Treaty of Versailles that precipitated the economic hardship of the early 1930s and led to Hitler’s ascent, others questioned “how a sophisticated people could have followed such a primitive ideology... [and have] elected a madman and a murderer as its saviour.” In coming to the realization that they had been pawns or bystanders within the totalitarian regime of the Nazis many now questioned who they were as a people.

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84 Jarausch, After Hitler, 70, 64.
85 Thielicke, Between Heaven and Earth, 176.
87 Jarausch, After Hitler, 58.
In addition to the shame over Nazism and the Holocaust, many Germans were humiliated by the post-war occupation of the conquering forces. Allied demands for reparations, the evisceration of the military, and the severe economic conditions imposed by the victors all contributed to a further sense of disgrace and a questioning of identity among the Germans.

2.2.2 Homelessness

Many Germans experienced to some degree a loss of identity and meaning as a result of losing their homes during the war. While Germany struggled to rebuild the countless homes that had been reduced to rubble by the Allied bombardment, millions were flooding into the country, having been uprooted and forced to flee their homes in the former German territories in Eastern Europe. Thielicke would have been well aware of the thousands of displaced persons (DPs) from Sudetenland who were crowded into refugee camps on the outskirts of Stuttgart in the years that he preached at the city’s St. Mark’s Cathedral. For some DPs it was a time of deep psychological suffering. Thielicke understood that part of the human condition is that our identity is tied to our past: where we were born and where we live helps shape who we are. Our past is one further relation that contributes to our identity, and when this relation is broken our identity, who we see ourselves to be, is threatened. Our homes are our roots and our history, and when we lose them, “we lose ourselves.”

The feeling of homelessness and its accompanying loss of identity were not confined to only those who lost their physical home in Germany or had fled the East; it was more widespread as it

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88 Thielicke, Being Human… Becoming Human, 46.
also included the loss of *Heimat*. *Heimat*, although translated as “home” or “homeland”, has a more focused definition. It refers to a particular geographical and societal region or locale and the relationship of that area to its inhabitants. The sociologist, Madan Sarup contends that the relationships people are born into are “always based on a place.” In a further reference to home and place, he suggests that “identity is a constitution, a consequence of a process of interaction between people, institutions and practices.” The traditions, dialect, strong communal bonds, and other socio-cultural features of a *Heimat* greatly contribute to the personal identity of its people. However, the Nazis’ creation of a national identity based on *Ein Reich*, *Ein Volk*, *Ein Fuehrer*, and the influx of refugees (having themselves left *Heimats*) altered the tight-knit social and cultural fabric across many areas of the country, and “drained *Heimat* of any substantive content.” And a drained *Heimat* contributed to a drained identity.

### 2.2.3 Marxism in the East

Nazism’s ideology of national interests and the social collective had led to a loss of individual freedom but also to an abdication of personal responsibility. All of this had a depersonalizing effect in the German West. Thielicke observed similar consequences under another ideology that had an iron grip on the East, including the newly-formed East Germany. Marxism under Stalin was a philosophical, social, and militaristic phenomenon that Thielicke viewed as the most immediate rival anthropology and a profound and pervasive threat to human identity and destiny. At its root, Marxism had been a revolt against the economic exploitation of the labour class by

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90 Ibid., 99.
the ruling class, an exploitation that reduced “man to a mere machine” and “a means to an end” and resulted in the individual person’s alienation and depersonalization. But what began in Marxism as a humanitarian effort to redress a social wrong had, for Thielicke, become a new form of human alienation that inhibited self-determination by continuing to view the individual only in economic terms. Emancipation had paradoxically morphed into oppression. Under Stalin’s communism, people were defined by their utility and valued solely for their ability to produce; “they [were] functionaries in a world of functions. This [was] their nobility.” Yet to the “ignoble” – those could not produce or would not conform – an anthropology based on utility was a death sentence. Thielicke saw not only the bodily threat but also the existential one of an oppressive ideology and a totalitarian system that treats people as objects to be exploited, absorbs them into the collective, and thus deprives them of a personal identity, self-determination, and fulfillment, all essential to human existence.

2.2.4 The Wirtschaftswunder and Materialism

The Wirtschaftswunder or economic miracle spurred by industrial growth, fiscal reform, and a willing and skilled labour force saw Germany become one of the world’s strongest economies during the 1950s. The country was producing high-quality household goods that were being exported around the globe. Simultaneously, the country’s high wages along with low taxes and low inflation ensured that millions of Germans were also able to buy those goods. But with the rapidly rising living standards, Thielicke observed an escalation in anxiety over the loss of identity and purpose. While the Germans may have thought the new-found pleasures and

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93 Ibid., 57.
94 Thielicke, *Theological Ethics: Volume II*, 47.
conveniences to be an antidote to their boredom, Thielicke recognized that they were merely filling a spiritual void with material things. What was a poverty of the stomach during the early postwar years had now become a poverty of the heart. Thielicke observed that the people had staked all their hopes and cares on improving their standard of living but had ignored the providential hand of God. In a sermon from 1955 he decried how humanity had “become debauched inwardly with excessive prosperity, comfort and boredom by inculcating the illusion that the peace of the soul is to be found in cars, TV sets [and] freezers.” He observed that many were unable “to distinguish between the ‘means’ which make our life easier, and the ‘meaning’ of our life, which is the only thing that makes life possible.”

The historian Jarausch contends that the newly-acquired, more affluent lifestyle also provided the West Germans a new self-image and sense of pride and prestige in place of the ones that had been severely damaged by the humiliation over Nazism and suffered even more under the occupying Allied powers. The new self-image was not merely a revamped “German” one. As part of their chameleon-like search for a new identity, young people in particular cast off their “Germanness” and adopted the fashionable lifestyle and dress, and modern culture of America. The economic recovery had made possible a “recovery of self-respect [and] offered working Germans a surrogate identity.” However, not unlike capitalist or Marxist exploitation it was an identity based on economic terms.

97 Jarausch, *After Hitler*, 64.
98 Ibid., 65.
German citizens not only used material wealth in an attempt to banish their boredom but also incessant activity to repress their anxiety. Of course, Thielicke did not dismiss the necessity of rebuilding the country, the legitimacy of protesting against nuclear armament, or the privilege of enjoying the latest Hollywood movie, but he viewed the busyness of the age to be an excuse to evade the question of meaning. He considered it a misunderstanding that anxiety is equated with low spirits; rather, he observed that the anxious person can be a whirlwind of activity.\(^99\) As noted earlier, for Thielicke, existential anxiety did not necessarily manifest itself emotionally. Anxiety need not “take the form of panic with a high pulse rate” but rather it “can be a forward flight in the form of activism, business, [and] even creative processes.”\(^100\) For Thielicke, patent activity often hid latent anxiety.

### 2.2.5 Technology

The *Wirtschaftswunder* and the material goods that were being mass-produced were also driven by the rapid advancements in science and technology during the 1950s. Thielicke contended that these developments, however, also contributed to humanity’s identity crisis, and were not unlike the Marxist threats that reduced a person to a mere functionary and absorbed the individual into the collective. The emerging technology of computers and automated production, along with the rows of factories containing endless assembly lines that were springing up as part of the economic miracle, were all depersonalizing forces: they readily denigrated human identity and

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\(^{99}\) Thielicke, *Nihilism*, 125. Preaching on the story of Cain and Abel, Thielicke points out that anxiety and activity were intertwined even in biblical times. Cain, although he is beset with guilt over his fratricide and anxious that he now may be slain, throws himself into a life of activity, wandering restlessly, building a city (Gen 4:14, 17). See Thielicke, *How the World Began*, 219.

\(^{100}\) Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith: Volume II*, 224.
creativity. Once a craftsman the human had now become a cog in a wheel. Thielicke observed that under the guise of progress “Homo faber threatens to become Homo fabricatus.”

Yet while some feared that technology would reduce the status of humanity to that of a mere machine, others contended it would elevate humanity’s potential. Thielicke observed that the advancements of the space-age brought with it the idea that humans could ascend to the heavens and be like God. Like the builders of that technological marvel the tower of Babel, humanity had developed the “disease of giantism.” However, the ability to reach for the stars did not bring about the ability to master destiny on earth. Instead, Thielicke felt, it had the opposite effect. Often echoing Einstein’s dictum that “we live in an age of perfect means and confused ends”, Thielicke insisted that “the question of what we can do threatens to cause us to forget what we are and what we ought not to do.” It was a time of inconceivable possibilities but also some frighteningly conceivable ones. The alienation of the human was one consequence of technology, but so too was the destruction of the human. If technology in the atomic age did not eliminate humanity figuratively, the weapons race could do it literally. Thus the fear of the future further reflected the Zeitgeist. Anxious over its new-found knowledge, and uncertain of where technological progress was leading, humanity was also now afraid of itself and aware again of its finitude. Ontological shock over one’s mortality had set in once more. As such, the meteoric rise in technology that brought prosperity and a sense of humanity’s own divinity also created further anxiety over identity and destiny.

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101 Thielicke, Being Human… Becoming Human, 293.
102 Thielicke, How the World Began, 278.
103 Ibid.
104 Thielicke may have eyed technology warily and humanity’s capitulation to it with concern, but he did so also with sarcasm. Once in a sermon, he quipped that “medical science is adding decades to human life… chemistry is
Thielicke observes that it is in turbulent times that existential anxieties arise, and the wartime and postwar periods in Germany were such times. Yet, he also recognizes that although the specific circumstances and events of the era may trigger such fears and anxieties, their root cause is the universal human condition of sin and God’s condemnation of sinners that alienates us from Him. It is this broken ultimate relation that produces anxiety and drives one to seek solace in penultimate relations. However, the outcome is that we succumb to these relations such that they come to control and define us. Alienated from our true humanity and beset with a false one, an identity crisis arises within us. Thielicke always contended that patent concerns about human identity and the apparent meaninglessness of life were really “latent religious questions” that only an anthropology founded on God’s love and grace toward humanity could address. 105 The following chapter considers this gospel-based response to the modern existential questions and concerns of the *Sitz im Leben*.

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105 Thielicke, *Being Human... Becoming Human*, 360.
Chapter 3

“Created and Called!” ¹⁰⁶ – Thielicke’s Theological Anthropology

As has been noted, the theme of theological anthropology is not treated in detail in Thielicke’s systematic theology. However, in his scholarly works Thielicke provides the requisite biblical building blocks upon which he constructs his anthropology. These foundational themes such as: *imago Dei* (image of God), relationality, alien dignity, being “in Christ” (the indicative), and becoming what you are (the imperative) will be discussed in this chapter.

3.1 *Imago Dei*

As has been described, Thielicke’s observations of the German *Sitz im Leben* led to his view that immanent relations, rather than the transcendent one with God, had come to define human existence. Worldly relations reflected the people’s self-understanding—a self-understanding that was located between the one extreme of desiring to be more than human, to be like God, and the other extreme of allowing themselves to become less than human, to become like an animal.¹⁰⁷ Thielicke maintained that with the former distortion, the individual elevates himself; he seeks independence and self-determination. With the latter, the individual surrenders himself to fate or external forces and influences. In both cases, the individual (although he realizes it less in the

former) forfeits his freedom and relinquishes his responsibility. Yet in doing so, Thielicke observes, humans cloud their true identity, security, and destiny. He contends that the human being was neither equal to God nor an animal ruled by instinct. Rather, as Thielicke saw declared in Holy Scripture, the human had been created in the image of God with the intent that the human be in a loving and responsible relationship with God and His creation. Thielicke observes that the Bible speaks about the human person only in regards to his or her relation to God. The whole gamut of human history as created, fallen, judged, alienated, redeemed, reconciled, sanctified beings relates to God. ¹⁰⁸ For Thielicke, the human-divine relation is grounded in the biblical doctrine of the image of God (*imago Dei*).

Thielicke was not alone in invoking the *imago* in his response to the question of human identity. For most Christian theologians *imago Dei* was, and remains, the core of a theological anthropology. However there has not been consensus on the interpretation of the concept, nor is there an explicit biblical explanation of its meaning. The three primary interpretations of *imago Dei* include: the ontological/structural, the functional, and the relational.

The ontological or structural view posits the notion that human attributes and capabilities such as rational thought, moral goodness, and self-transcendence reflect the Creator. Humanity is considered unique among all God’s creatures because God has bestowed these divine traits only on the human creature.

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The functional view contends God’s authority is seen in humanity’s having received the divine command to have dominion over creation. *Imago Dei* therefore means to *do* God’s will; it is “something that humans do, rather than something human persons *are.*”¹⁰⁹ The third view, the relational, contends that humans were created to be personal beings in relationship with one another. Human beings reflect the relationality of God’s being which is constituted in the loving and self-giving relationship of the three persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit. God is love (1 John 4:16) and the intratrinitarian relations define this divine essence. Humans, as the *imago Dei*, are therefore to exist in loving relationships with God and each other.

Thielicke views our *imago* as “a relational entity” that reflects God’s own relations.¹¹⁰ In articulating relationality Thielicke derives his interpretation of the concept based on the witness of Scripture. As a result, he certainly would have affirmed Schwoebel’s contention that:

> The language of relationality… does not posit an already given ontology of the background of the biblical testimonies. Rather, it attempts to construct an ontology based on the reading of the interactions of God with particular human beings in a world of particular characteristics. A relational approach takes the language of the biblical witnesses seriously in an ontological sense.¹¹¹

Crucial to Thielicke’s understanding of *imago Dei* as a relational concept is that in creating humanity in His own image (Gen 1:27), God breathes life into the human (Gen 2:7) and speaks

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¹¹⁰ Thielicke, *Theological Ethics: Volume I*, 157. Thielicke’s relational *imago Dei* has a functional or teleological component that reflects humanity’s relation to, and ruling over the rest of Creation. However, Thielicke insists that humanity’s relation to God has “strict pre-eminence” within the hierarchy of humanity’s relations, and thus over its ruling function (157). The functional aspect is clearly subsumed within the relational view because apart from God humanity can do nothing (John 15:5). Cortez also contends that teleology is part of a relational *imago Dei*. He considers the teleological view to be “an expression of the relationality that we see in the triune God and in humans as in interpersonal community.” See Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 134.

to the person (Gen 1:28).\textsuperscript{112} God has called the human being by his name (Is 43:1). In being called by God, humanity is given the freedom to respond to the call. Thielicke contends that the “divine address… constitutes the person” and this unique event places the human person in a relationship with the three persons of the triune God, and other human persons.\textsuperscript{113} A divine likeness based on the divine address distinguishes the human person from non-person creatures whom God merely summoned into existence with a “let there be” (Gen 1:21, 25).\textsuperscript{114} Employing Buber’s terminology, Thielicke describes the non-human creature as an “it” while observing that it is only the human who is called into the I-Thou relation.\textsuperscript{115} In being addressed by God, the human being has received “God’s Word [and] herein lies his… dignity.”\textsuperscript{116} As we will see further on, dignity is central to Thielicke’s understanding of anthropology and the image of God.

Thielicke maintains that the I-Thou/thou relation defines the person because the concept of personhood by its nature is a relational entity; a person is a person only in relation to another person.\textsuperscript{117} In other words, the ontology of the person is onto-relationality.\textsuperscript{118} Personhood and the relationships that God calls humanity to in the imago reflect His own personhood and interpersonal relations within the Trinity. The names, Father and Son, by definition imply a

\textsuperscript{112} Thielicke, Theological Ethics: Volume I, 159.
\textsuperscript{113} Thielicke, The Evangelical Faith: Volume II, 164.
\textsuperscript{114} Thielicke, How the World Began, 219.
\textsuperscript{115} Thielicke, The Evangelical Faith: Volume I, 147.
\textsuperscript{116} Thielicke, Theological Ethics: Volume I, 152.
\textsuperscript{117} Thielicke, The Hidden Question of God, 174.
\textsuperscript{118} It was the Scottish theologian and pastor Thomas F. Torrance (1913-2007) who, in developing his view that relations constitute being, coined the term “onto-relations.” He writes: “the concept of person, in its supreme sense in God and in its subordinate sense in human existence, in accordance with which the relations between personal beings belong to what persons really are in their own beings. That is to say, the relations which persons have with one another as persons are onto-relations, for they are person-constituting relations.” See Thomas F. Torrance, The Mediation of Christ (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, Publishers, Inc., 1992), 48-49.
relation, and the idea of Spirit implies an outward movement from this relation.\textsuperscript{119} God Himself by the fact of His Trinitarian relations therefore has personhood. However, the persons of the Trinity are not modeled on the human conception of person. To do so would make God an image of man.\textsuperscript{120} Rather, it is human personhood that is viewed in light of Trinitarian personhood. The divine person is not to be understood “anthropomorphously;” instead, the human person having been created in the image of God is to be understood “theomorphously.”\textsuperscript{121}

To be called into a divine relationship, and thereby given personhood, endows the human with a unique identity within Creation but, as Thielicke contends, it also brings responsibility. Humanity is given a gift and with this gift, a task.\textsuperscript{122} Constitutive of our identity (the indicative) is our destiny (the imperative) which God bestows upon us in the \textit{imago Dei}. We are created \textit{and} called: created to be in relationship and called to actualize it. The human being has been given both personhood and the need to actualize that personhood by living in loving fellowship with God and other persons. This imperative reflects a teleological aspect of \textit{imago}, but this aspect is founded on the overall relational view.\textsuperscript{123} The divine imperative as a component of Thielicke’s anthropology will be discussed further in section 3.3 \textit{Become What You Are}, but it is worth noting here that Thielicke advances his thesis on \textit{imago Dei} in his \textit{Theological Ethics}, a major scholarly work paralleling \textit{The Evangelical Faith}, but completed ten years before it.\textsuperscript{124} In his work on ethics, Thielicke seeks to address how one ought to live amidst the web of relations of

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\textsuperscript{119} Thielicke, \textit{The Evangelical Faith: Volume II}, 165.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 114.
\textsuperscript{122} Thielicke, \textit{Theological Ethics: Volume I}, 152.
\textsuperscript{123} See Footnote 110.
\textsuperscript{124} As well as being a systematic theologian, Thielicke was also a notable ethicist and his four-volume \textit{Theological Ethics} is considered to be his most important theological work.
the *Sitz im Leben*, which is “the whole of the reality in which modern man finds himself.”  

Thus Thielicke interprets ethics in light of his view of anthropology and humanity’s identity and destiny. Gift *and* task are foundational to his relational concept of *imago Dei*.

Important for our thesis is that by advocating a divine likeness based on relationality to aid in addressing the modern existential concerns he observes, Thielicke’s thinking gives credence to the view that the interpretation of *imago Dei* “has often reflected the *Zeitgeist* and has followed whatever emphasis happened to be current in psychology or philosophy or sociology or theology.”  

However, as has been previously noted, Thielicke’s theological method never accommodated the Gospel to the culture. Rather his actualization approach presented the biblical truth in a contemporary way without compromising Scripture’s normativity. Thielicke may have engaged the *Zeitgeist*, but his articulation of a relational *imago Dei* is founded on the eternal Word of God, made manifest in Jesus Christ (John 1:1) and attested by Scripture.

Although Thielicke’s relational *imago Dei* may reflect the *Zeitgeist*, his emphasis on scriptural foundation of his view and his actualization approach seem to have present-day support. Without specifically naming Thielicke, theologians Gregory Boyd and Paul Eddy appear to uphold his method. Boyd and Eddy oppose the stance that the relational view merely accommodates modern culture, that the view arises from interpreting the Bible through “the lenses of contemporary existential and/or psychological paradigms.”  

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relationality reflects the accepted modern scientific view of humans as social beings—and that is a good thing—it remains rooted in Scripture.

Also important for our thesis is that Thielicke not only understood the modern pastoral benefits of a relational imago for the Sitz im Leben, but also that he recognized the negative consequences of an ontological one. Thielicke finds no scriptural support for an interpretation of divine likeness based on constituent qualities. While he acknowledges that in creating the human, God endowed it with qualities such as reason and self-consciousness, he insists that such ontological attributes neither define the human nor are they characteristic of the divine image. In the same way that we do not know God by His attributes, but rather by His relations to us in Christ, so it is with the image of God. 128 Thus Thielicke maintains that the imago Dei is “a relational state and not a state of being.” 129 The uniqueness of the human creature derives not from its rationality but from its relationality. It is neither the capacities seemingly inherent in us nor even the capacities that God gives us. Rather it is God’s actions of creating, calling, and reconciling that define us. The imago is thus not an attribute of the person but rather it is “an attribute of the relationship in which [the person] stands.” 130 Long after our value may have diminished in the eyes of the world (if it was even ever regarded by the world’s eyes) we remain the apple of God’s eye (Deut 32:10). 131 The prevailing modern attitude is that our functional abilities or constituent qualities define our being and give us our worth. Against this Thielicke looks to the Old Testament and reminds us of the Psalmist’s existential question, “What is man that you are mindful of him?” (8.4). The modern theologian counter-offers that “phenomenologically, there is nothing in man

129 Ibid., 154.
130 Ibid., 180.
131 Thielicke, Being Human... Becoming Human, 85.
to justify this reference.” Thielicke, *Theological Ethics: Volume I*, 166.

133 Ibid.

134 Ibid, 171.

135 Ibid, 170.
mends the breach by taking on our sin, giving us His righteousness, and thus rescinding His condemnation. Crucial for Thielicke is that Christ removes everything that separates us from God’s love (Rom 8:31-39).\textsuperscript{136} It is also by this work of Christ that we receive a new identity.\textsuperscript{137} It is Jesus, who as the original image of God (Col 1:15, 2 Cor 4.4), reinstates our divine likeness. He is the “prototype (Urbild)”\textsuperscript{138} of authentic, unfallen humanity and “the only man who fulfills humanity.”\textsuperscript{139} Sin and divine judgment (condemnation) have alienated humanity from God, and with that relation—crucial to our identity—broken, humanity does not know itself. It is only when we behold the man (\textit{ecce homo}) Jesus, who “represents the whole and intact man [and] who stands in harmony with God,” that we come to know our true selves.\textsuperscript{140} Succinctly put: “What man is, I know only in the face of the humanity of Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{141} Having restored humanity’s fragmented relationship with the Father, Christ thereby restores its fragmented \textit{imago}, and thus restores our authentic identity, too.

Thielicke interprets our restored \textit{imago} as a mirror, and by doing so he emphasizes once again that the \textit{imago} is not based on our inherent ontological attributes; that is, on qualities that we possess.\textsuperscript{142} Rather, as a mirror our divine likeness reflects the qualities of Christ (2 Cor 3:18) and His relationship with the Father; e.g. His faithfulness and righteousness.\textsuperscript{143} By our relationship to Christ we receive His image and share in His likeness (Rom 8:29); Christians by

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{136} Thielicke, \textit{The Evangelical Faith: Volume II}, 341.
\bibitem{137} Ibid., 406.
\bibitem{138} Thielicke, \textit{Theological Ethics: Volume I}, 184.
\bibitem{139} Ibid., 166.
\bibitem{140} Thielicke, \textit{The Evangelical Faith: Volume II}, 293.
\bibitem{141} Thielicke, \textit{Theological Ethics: Volume II}, 613.
\bibitem{142} Thielicke, \textit{Theological Ethics: Volume I}, 152.
\bibitem{143} Ibid., 191.
\end{thebibliography}
faith are “in Christ,” participating in His divine likeness. And by being in Christ we now stand in the same relationship to the Father as Christ stands. Although Thielicke states that it is our divine likeness and our relationship to God that defines us, he also recognizes that it is an identity that is imparted to sinful human beings based entirely on their relation to Christ. He contends that “we are persons only ‘in relation.’” But it is only a Christological relation that grants genuine personhood. Moreover, authentic human existence is “a being in the truth” of Christ (John 18:37). To live “in Christ” suggests also that we are freed from the determinative factor of the penultimate relations of this world and the false identities that such relations confer on us. We are no longer subject to, but rather delivered from, “the ruling powers of this aeon and [in turn] set under the dominion of a new and different Lord.” No longer determined by such powers, we are now set in a new and ultimate relation that restores our true identity. Our life—and our identity—are secure in Christ; they are now hidden with Christ in God. (Col 3:3).

Thielicke always contended that “when a man seeks himself, [the seeker]… realizes himself only when he loses his life in God.” It follows then that a Scripture-informed Christology is fundamental to Thielicke’s anthropopolgy; it is only in Christ, and our relationship to God through Christ, that our real identity—not the false ones the world gives us or that we give ourselves—is revealed.

144 Ibid., 184. Although God has created all of humanity in His image and reconciled us to Him in Christ such that all are in a relationship with Him, it is only the Christian, who being “in Christ” apprehends this relationship by faith.
145 Ibid., 191.
146 Thielicke, The Evangelical Faith: Volume II, 293.
147 Thielicke, Theological Ethics: Volume I, 40.
3.2.1 The Peace of Christ

Essential for a discussion on existential anxiety and Christian anthropology is the existential peace that exists when we are in Christ. The Son who is at peace with the Father restores that same peace to us; He is our peace (Eph 2:14). Thielicke contends that “peace” in the Bible is to be interpreted as “peace with God.” To have the peace of Christ is to be at peace with the Father. However, Thielicke emphasizes that this objective peace between God and humanity does not necessarily produce a subjective, psychical one in the human being. He puts it aptly: “Peace is not a matter of ‘domestic policy,’ the peace of the inner self… [I]t is rather a matter of ‘foreign policy,’ a state of peace with God.” In the same manner that our existential state may not manifest emotional anxiety it also may not exhibit psychical peace. Although Thielicke does acknowledge that inner peace, a “peace of mind,” can arise in us as a beneficial by-product when we are in Christ, it is only because Christ first has established an external peace between us and God.

3.2.2 Alien Dignity

Correlated to the concepts of imago Dei and relationality, and fundamental to Thielicke’s theological anthropology, is the idea of “alien dignity.” The concept is based on Luther’s doctrine of justification in which Christ’s alien righteousness is bestowed upon us and justifies us by faith before God. In a similar manner, alien dignity is imparted to us. Our dignity is not

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149 Thielicke, Theological Ethics: Volume I, 188.
150 Thielicke, Man in God’s World. 92.
151 Thielicke, Theological Ethics: Volume I, 189.
152 Ibid.
inherently our own, nor is it something that the world bestows or withholds, but it is conferred on us freely and lovingly by God as we own in faith the sacrificial death of Christ. By Christ, we have infinite worth. God has reconciled us to Himself by giving us Christ’s dignity.

Thielicke considers this alien dignity crucial for the Sitz im Leben, and thus, similarly for the larger theme of theological anthropology. The concept is discussed more prominently in his popular and pastoral works, in contrast to his academic writings. This suggests alien dignity was an element of God’s grace that Thielicke clearly sought to communicate to a wider audience. Human dignity, like our original imago, had been defiled by the Fall. But this defilement had countless contemporary expressions in our worldly relations. In particular, Thielicke contends that human dignity has been denigrated by the indiscriminate use of technology (Homo fabricatus), and by ideologies and totalitarian regimes that have reduced people to a mere means to an end, or absorbed them into the collective. He observed how the social class system conferred dignity upon the wealthy and mighty, and how the Nazi programs denied it to those feeble in mind and body, or of “impure” bloodlines. As a result, Thielicke emphasizes once more that human worth is not an ontological characteristic, an inherent quality. He maintains that dignity was given to the human person from the outside: “the divine alienum.” Thielicke, The Hidden Question of God, 63. It is God who dignifies people by creating them in His image. He calls them to fellowship, and restores their fragmented imago by crediting to them the divine likeness of Christ and His alien dignity. Thielicke repeatedly reminds his readers that our dignity is never based on what we can do but rather on what God has done. Christ’s “alienum becomes our proprium.” Thielicke, Theological Ethics: Volume I, 193.
Thielicke asserts the security against anxiety offered by having an alien dignity. It confers unconditional human worth and reflects unconditional divine love. If human anxiety stems from a broken relationship, divine love restores it.\textsuperscript{155} In being loved by God, and having been bought with a price (1 Cor 6:20), the person is “inviolable” and delivered “from the throttling clutches of those who think only in economic terms.”\textsuperscript{156} Similarly, those who have no functional value and whom society considers a burden are consoled by knowing they have infinite worth in the eyes of the Lord because they are the beneficiaries of Jesus Christ.

3.2.3 Jesus’ Solidarity with Humanity

An additional aspect of God’s relationship with humanity that Thielicke emphasizes, and which reflects his pastoral concern, is that of Jesus’ solidarity with human suffering. This element of divine grace is expressed in his sermon, \textit{I Am Not Alone with My Anxiety}. At first blush the title suggests that we are surrounded by anguished people, that anxiety afflicts the whole populace. Although this is quite likely the case, as evidenced by the previously noted opinion poll, Thielicke’s point is rather that we are not alone because Christ is with us in our anxiety. However, Christ’s presence does not reflect merely His sympathy toward us, but rather it reveals His own suffering. He has suffered too, and suffered for us.\textsuperscript{157} That Jesus stood alongside the German people in the midst of their suffering was a dominant theme in Thielicke’s sermons during the war and in the difficult early postwar years. A sermon title such as \textit{Jesus Christ in the Front Line Trenches}, or comments such as the following, reflect his preaching during the era:

\textsuperscript{155} Thielicke, \textit{The Silence of God}, 8.
\textsuperscript{156} Thielicke, \textit{Nihilism}, 112.
\textsuperscript{157} Thielicke, \textit{The Silence of God}, 9.
We see that he is suffering and dying and bearing [our] sin with us, that he is one of us, our comrade in the abyss and in death.\textsuperscript{158}

and

From nights of bombing to the loneliness of those left behind... [Christ] himself suffers this dreadful scene, this terrible fate, in his own soul... nothing can happen to us that has not already entered the Saviour’s eye and wounded his heart.\textsuperscript{159}

Amidst this death and destruction, Thielicke declares that Jesus stood in solidarity with the victims of war, having Himself suffered dereliction and death at Golgotha. The cross was “both the high point and also [the] low point” of Christ’s solidarity with humanity.\textsuperscript{160} By His crucifixion, Christ not only suffered physical torture, but He bore the pain of rejection of those He loved. This rejection, although, culminating at Calvary, also manifested itself throughout Jesus’ earthly sojourn. As a result, Thielicke sought to proclaim that by His suffering Jesus identifies with humanity not only in death, but also in the struggles of life. Jesus’ years of ministry were filled with commotion and hostility. With nowhere to lay His head (Matt. 8:20), Jesus is a comrade to the DPs: He is “the very prototype of the homeless one.”\textsuperscript{161}

However, Thielicke recognizes that Christ’s incarnation was not merely a gesture of solidarity; Christ came into the world precisely to overcome it (John 16:33). While Jesus has certainly taken

\begin{footnotes}
\item[159] Thielicke, \textit{Life Can Begin Again}, 16.
\item[160] Thielicke, \textit{The Evangelical Faith: Volume II}, 383.
\end{footnotes}
on “membership” in human history, He also remains lord over it.\textsuperscript{162} Thus Thielicke can call Jesus our brother, and in the same sermon two lines later he can call him our King. He understood that to preach Jesus’ solidarity with human suffering is found wanting if it does not also proclaim who it was that suffered. Thielicke recognizes that “the solidarity of [the] man [Jesus] with our guilt, suffering and death does not help us, only the solidarity of God himself.”\textsuperscript{163}

Thielicke admitted that he struggled to achieve a proper balance between preaching God’s divinity and His humanity, and that he focused at times too much on the latter. Still, he knew that Jesus was not simply a perfect model of a human, but God Himself. He contends that if only Jesus’ humanity is preached “you’ve only touched the hem of his garment.”\textsuperscript{164} Thielicke may have argued for a Christology “from below”: that we need to begin with Christ’s humanity, and in turn His affinity and solidarity with us.\textsuperscript{165} However, in proclaiming this nature of Christ’s being and act, Thielicke does not accommodate the biblical truth to meet a particular need in the culture. The integrity of the Gospel, and who Jesus is, is never compromised. Thus in declaring Jesus’ full humanity, Thielicke also always maintained that Christ transcends all human affinities; He “was someone totally different, he was... the Son of the Father.”\textsuperscript{166} Thielicke knew that only the objective truth of Christ’s divine nature could provide true pastoral benefits to the \textit{Sitz im Leben}.

\textsuperscript{162} Thielicke, \textit{The Evangelical Faith: Volume II}, 280.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 325.
\textsuperscript{164} Thielicke, \textit{Christ and the Meaning of Life}, 54. This issue was the one fault that Thielicke had with the sermons of the great English preacher, Charles Spurgeon. Although a great admirer of Spurgeon’s sermons, Thielicke believed that the Englishman may have been too one-sided in preaching Christ’s humanity. See Helmut Thielicke, \textit{Encounter with Spurgeon}, trans. John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 30.
\textsuperscript{165} Thielicke, \textit{The Evangelical Faith: Volume II}, 272.
\textsuperscript{166} Thielicke, \textit{Man in God’s World}, 92.
In proclaiming Jesus’ solidarity to comfort people in the *Sitz im Leben* Thielicke recognizes that it is not only crucial to declare the divinity and humanity of Christ, i.e. His being, but also to declare His acts. To those suffering the physical and psychological anguish of the war or afflicted with the existential anxiety of the era, Thielicke does not simply proclaim that God in the Incarnation merely stands in solidarity with humanity. God did not become one of us only so that humanity may be comforted by having a God who experienced human suffering. Although it may be emotionally appealing that Jesus was acquainted with grief and therefore can relate to ours, the real appeal, the real benefit is that He has defeated death and reconciled humanity to God. Christ does not “stand pat” in the front-line trenches; He acts. Christ in both His being and His acts is one: He is what He does and He does what He is. The Gospel is about the mighty works of God, and the benefits of Christ. Thus Thielicke can have Jesus say, “I am in the midst of you, and that because you are suffering my sorrows, I will also lead you to my fulfilments and my blessings.”

However, Thielicke insists that in bestowing His benefits upon humanity, Christ is not reduced to the role of a functionary. He is more than His acts. Although He is known by His works, He is more than they. He is the Son of God whose existence precedes the Incarnation. For Thielicke, Christ’s presence within the Trinity, before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4), is an “inalienable element of any theology with a Trinitarian orientation.” Christ in being the Word is God, and was with God from the beginning (John 1:1). Thus, as the Creator is not

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167 It was the appeal of mutual suffering that Thielicke believed contributed to the crowding of churches on Good Friday. The people wanted to see in the dereliction of Christ a reflection of their own misery. See Thielicke, *I Believe: The Christian’s Creed*, 151.
170 Ibid., 264.
defined by His creation neither is Christ defined by His acts within it. God neither needs the
world nor His acts within it to determine His Being.\textsuperscript{171} God in His love and His divine
sovereignty is who He is apart from who He is and what He does for humanity.\textsuperscript{172} Thielicke’s
concern is that to espouse merely a functional Christ or to promote an economic Trinity over an
ontological Trinity “completely absorbs the being of God into the event of the revelation... and
reduces God’s being to its phenomenal aspect.”\textsuperscript{173} As David Scott explains, the ontological
Trinity and God’s sovereignty were crucial for Thielicke’s theological ethics, but also for his
anthropology because by them “the Christian is related to God in God’s own freedom and
being.”\textsuperscript{174}

Thielicke understood how a Christology that was not purely functional also aided in countering
anthropologies that reduced the human to a means-to-an-end. If Christ were only a means to the
Father’s end, then some in society can legitimately be a mere means to another’s end. Thielicke
repeatedly emphasizes that the human’s identity is not that of an instrument, but rather that of
being in relation, of being “in Christ.” Although our identity is not based on our worldly works,
Thielicke further argues that neither is it founded on our Christian acts. Our being, the indicative,
is grounded in God’s grace; it comes from being in a relationship with Christ “the Exemplar” not

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 178.
\textsuperscript{172} While the ontological (or immanent) Trinity refers to God’s nature and His intratrinitarian relationships, and the
economic Trinity to His relationship with His creation, they presuppose and imply each other; the “face of God”
(economic) and the “heart of God” (ontological) are one.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 181.
\textsuperscript{174} David A. Scott, “The Trinity and Ethics: The Thought of Helmut Thielicke,” \textit{Lutheran Quarterly} 29 no.1 (1977),
9.
by imitating Christ “the example.” It is not what we do but who we are: children of God, created in His image.

However, as has been noted, along with the gift there is a task. Accompanying the indicative (our being) is the imperative (our becoming). Our identity, our imago, along with being “created by God (indicative)... [requires that we] put on the “new man” who is renewed on the model of this image (Col 3:10).” This teleological component of our relational imago is considered below.

3.3 “Become What You Are”

As has been noted, an essential element of Thielicke’s theological anthropology was that human existence needs to be actualized. It is not only the indicative element (being) of human existence but the fulfillment of the imperative element (becoming) that forms our authentic human person. To actualize one’s true identity (the gift) one needs to embrace one’s true destiny (the task). God has called His people, but He seeks that they respond to Him freely. For Thielicke, the freedom that the human creature has been granted is a fundamental constituent of the human person. Biblical freedom does not mean that humanity has the liberty to choose to either obey God or disobey Him; “it does not mean that I can do what I like.” Rather, we are “freed” to become what we are. We are freed to choose God; there are no impediments to obeying Him and thereby actualizing our existence and fulfilling our destiny.

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175 Thielicke, Theological Ethics: Volume I, 186ff.
176 Thielicke, The Evangelical Faith: Volume II, 301.
177 Thielicke, Theological Ethics: Volume I, 152.
178 Thielicke, Being Human... Becoming Human, 35.
179 Ibid., 16.
180 Ibid., 213.
To “become what you are” is to reflect divine likeness by living in communion with God and in community with our neighbour. Life has a teleology: “divine likeness is not just that from which I come… it is also that to which… I go.”\textsuperscript{181} Fulfillment of the divine imperative realizes our human indicative, and therefore being and becoming are fundamentally related. Thielicke observes:

\begin{quote}
[that] whenever the imperative is isolated from the indicative or the indicative from the imperative, the absolutizing in either case leads to an autonomy of the ego, to its separation from the fellowship between God and man, to its release from all connection with the alienum.\textsuperscript{182}
\end{quote}

However, although the indicative and the imperative are essential to each other, their order is critical: the indicative precedes the imperative. To illustrate this crucial point, Thielicke cites the rich young ruler from the synoptic Gospels. The young man has the order of the two elements backwards. He seeks to identify the imperative in order to obtain the indicative, and this leads to his existential crisis.\textsuperscript{183} His objective is “self-confirmation” rather than selfless commitment to God.\textsuperscript{184}

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\textsuperscript{181} Thielicke, \textit{Theological Ethics: Volume I}, 152.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 258. Although the young man departs in sorrow, unable to meet Jesus’ challenge and still beset with his existential crisis, Thielicke still proclaims the grace in the passage. In response to “And Jesus, looking upon him, loved him” (Mk 10:21), Thielicke claims: “I find that to be one of the most comforting places in the whole New Testament. Jesus does not love me just when I do something right, when I am therefore perfect and fit. Long before I get to that point, and even when I don’t make it, I am already beloved. He always has the initiative.” See Thielicke, \textit{How to Believe Again}, 108-9.
\textsuperscript{184} Thielicke, \textit{The Evangelical Faith: Volume II}, 95.
\end{flushright}
Similar to the indicative and the imperative, our love of the triune God and our love of our neighbour are “indissolubly related”. Our obedience to the transcendent is fulfilled immanently; “it can be rendered only in… the concrete relationships of the world.” Thielicke insists that the gift of our indicative, hidden in Christ, impels us to fulfill the imperative: love the neighbour whom also Christ has rescued and bound Himself to (Rom 14:15). If true personhood and infinite worth are imparted to us in our alien dignity, then we are to affirm that same alien dignity in others, to see in them what Christ sees. Informed and normed by Scripture, Thielicke asserts that we are no longer to see ourselves and others from a worldly point of view (2 Cor 5:16) (i.e., “in an erotic [or] economic sense,”) but rather as God’s image. Thus for Thielicke “love your neighbour” is, strictly speaking, not an imperative; rather it is a realization that we cannot but love those who bear the divine image.

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186 Thielicke, Theological Ethics: Volume I, 471. Thielicke recognized the complexities and ambiguities of human relations in the real world, but also that the church needed to address these relations if it wanted to engage modern humanity. Love your neighbor was not merely about giving to the poor or visiting the sick. It was not an abstract command that ignored the reality of actual, and often conflicting, encounters. As an example, Thielicke cites the businessman who wants to know how to treat his competitor who, also like the businessman, has a business to run and employees to support. See The Trouble with the Church (71).
188 Thielicke, The Evangelical Faith: Volume II, 231. Here Thielicke’s notion of the command of God has the form of invitation or permission; it was a point made also by both Calvin and Barth. Barth contended that God commands the human person “to be what he is… [and that God] calls him to freedom in fellowship with others. He calls him to find himself by affirming the other, to know joy by comforting the other, and self-expression by honouring the other. We have now to understand the divine command as the call to this freedom—the invitation to humanity.” Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics III/4, Volume 19 §54.1, (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 109-110.
3.3.1 The Work of the Spirit

Thielicke recognizes that to become what you are, to actualize authentic humanity, involves the Holy Spirit: “we are not given something to do without first being given something.”\textsuperscript{189} It is the Holy Spirit who opens our eyes to see the alien dignity and \textit{imago Dei} in others, to see them as a “thou.” As a result the imperative, like the indicative, reflects relationality. By its nature the imperative is a relational concept because it involves being in a loving relationship with the Person of God and creaturely persons. The Christian’s ethic is, as Scott refers to it, “a relational ethic.”\textsuperscript{190} However, it is also a relational ethic because it is a command that only can be fulfilled when we are related to the Spirit. By the Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, God imparts Himself to us and we come to know Him as our Creator and Redeemer (1 Cor 2:10f).\textsuperscript{191} Since apart from God we can do nothing (John 15:5), it is only by our relation to the Spirit that we are enabled to be related to Christ and hear His voice (John 18:37). By inviting the Spirit to work within us, we become a new creation (John 3:3, 5, 2 Cor 5:17), transformed to participate in the I-Thou and I-thou relations to which God has called us. It is the Spirit who transforms us into the divine likeness (2 Cor 3:18) that comprises these relations. Our transformation by the work of the Spirit is truly “ontic and not just a cognitive changing of life.”\textsuperscript{192} The Spirit effects in us what Christ has achieved for us—our becoming a new creation; the Spirit simultaneously gives us to know this transformation and to live it.

\textsuperscript{189} Thielicke, \textit{Life Can Begin Again}, xiii.
\textsuperscript{190} Scott, \textit{Lutheran Quarterly} 29 no.1, 9.
\textsuperscript{191} Thielicke, \textit{The Evangelical Faith: Volume III}, 24.
\textsuperscript{192} Thielicke, \textit{The Evangelical Faith: Volume II}, 94.
Related to Thielicke’s recurring stance against an *imago* based on our inherent attributes is his emphasis that although the Spirit is present in us, we, however, do not “have” the Spirit. Possession suggests a human attribute or characteristic.\(^{193}\) It is the Spirit who lays hold of us, and His work in us abolishes any idea that our works reflect an ontological quality.\(^{194}\) The human person—created, redeemed, and sanctified by the three persons of the Trinity—aﬃrms for Thielicke that theological anthropology is “always a relational concept.”\(^{195}\)

### 3.3.2 Spiritual and Practical Implications

Thielicke contends that fulfilling the imperative of entering into a divine relationship under the power of the Spirit actualizes authentic human existence and thereby alleviates anxiety concerning identity and meaning. Although fellowship with God does not provide a formula or solution to making sense of an often absurd world, when we let God be God and trust in Him who has overcome the world (John 16:33) “the riddles will no longer torment.”\(^{196}\) “To become what you are” is to confess by faith and live out the words of the Psalmist (that Thielicke repeatedly referenced): “Nevertheless I am continually with thee” (73:23). To remain in Christ by trusting God does not remove the inscrutability of the riddles because God’s thoughts are not ours (Is. 55:8); rather it means we can be free of their torment now and know we will be free of them altogether in the eschaton.\(^{197}\) “To become what you are” is to bear God’s image, and therefore to remain in the relation that we have been created for, and called to.

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\(^{194}\) Ibid., 179.

\(^{195}\) Ibid., 179.

\(^{196}\) Thielicke, *Theological Ethics: Volume I*, 83.

\(^{197}\) Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again*, 145.

\(^{197}\) Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith: Volume II*, 82.
As we have seen, “to become what you are” is also to love your neighbours by addressing their concrete needs. In particular, Thielicke considers the suffering resulting from the *Wirtschaftswunder* and its growing expressions of materialism. During the war and the early postwar years there had been a solidarity among the Germans; their collective suffering and poverty caused them to tend to one another’s needs. However, Thielicke observes that the new-found prosperity of the later postwar era had led to a callousness and indifference towards the poor and the ill. As Jarausch also contends, “previous solidarity suddenly developed a rift.”

The rift was not confined to secular society. Thielicke observed it too in the ‘practising’ members of the Church. He was not reluctant to admonish his congregants to actualize their faith and personhood not by sitting around and speculating about the Virgin Birth or the doctrine of atonement, but “instead, do something in [Jesus’] name!”

However, Thielicke is not simply referring to “random acts of kindnesses” but to an overhaul of the state’s social programs. He wants to see not only the effects of crime and poverty addressed but also their root causes. In a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan he envisions a sequel to the story in which the Samaritan now continues his loving deeds by seeking to address the causes that brought about the robbery on the road to Jericho.

Thielicke has the Samaritan thinking, “What led to the robbers becoming robbers?” In response, Thielicke preaches that, both society’s welfare programs and an individual’s expressions of love need to be not merely reactionary but foresighted. It needs to be “planned love.” Thielicke recognizes his sequel to the text is a bit

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201 Thielicke, *Being Human... Becoming Human*, 266.
of a fantasy but he wants to show that led by the Spirit love can be inventive and imaginative, that it can unleash all kinds of energy and ideas that benefit society.\textsuperscript{202}

In seeking to address “the gaping, bleeding wounds of the social organism,” Thielicke considers not only the physical needs of our neighbour but their spiritual sicknesses and existential anxieties too.\textsuperscript{203} In an age of alienation, Thielicke seeks to have his listeners attend to those who have succumbed to nihilism, who are overcome with worry or boredom, or who are seeking identity and security in materialism. If to exist is to be in relation we should endeavour to help others “exist” by being in relation with them. This includes sharing with our neighbour the good news of Jesus Christ, and a particular form or aspect of divine grace: true identity and dignity are based on a relationship with God on account of Christ.

Thus Thielicke desires that Christians proclaim the Gospel to their neighbours in their shared vernacular with the assurance that God, who in Christ has imparted His divine likeness and alien dignity on them, will also give His Spirit to aid their proclamation. Having himself been made a new creation, Thielicke, similarly was able to proclaim this aspect of God’s grace in a new way to a new generation. It is to this proclamation to which we now turn.

\textsuperscript{202} Thielicke, How to Believe Again, 126.
\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 124.
Chapter 4
Proclaiming Theological Anthropology to the *Sitz im Leben*

As has been noted, it is in Thielicke’s *The Evangelical Faith*, his systematic theology, that he advances his thesis that theology must address contemporary concerns and respond with the eternal Gospel. However, his theological anthropology, which this thesis claims is a model for his theological approach, is not formally discussed in his systematic work. Instead, he discusses the theme of theological anthropology more often and in greater detail in his more accessible writings and sermons. This incongruity does not imply that he downplayed the necessity of developing a structured theological anthropology in his academic works. Rather, it suggests that he was pastorally concerned about modern culture’s search for identity and meaning. Thus, he sought to highlight the culture’s existential concerns, and the Gospel’s response to them, in writings that had a wider audience in mind and would have a more general appeal. As this thesis will show, Thielicke’s preaching and popular works on theological anthropology reflect his overall theological approach of engaging challenges raised by the *Sitz im Leben* and responding with an application of the biblical message and a particular articulation of God’s grace. This theological approach of engaging the *Sitz im Leben* includes not only listening to the culture’s concerns but also responding to them in the culture’s language.
4.1 Popular Writings

In addition to writing scholarly theological treatises, Thielicke was a prolific writer of popular works. Yet, in describing his non-academic writings, he eschewed the term “popular.” He maintained that it suggested superficiality, an approach that fails to probe the difficult issues and the various arguments that theological reflection requires. It was obvious to him that non-academic works, as with scholarly writings, needed to be prepared with intellectual rigour. Thus, Thielicke considered his more accessible writings such as sermons, essays and public lectures to the laity to be “post-scientific” or “post-scholarly.” He used the term “post” because he held that the heavy lifting of the “scientific” or scholarly work had already been undertaken.

Although his more accessible works may not contain what Thielicke calls “the scholarly apparatus” of footnotes, excurses, and the theological terms of an academic address, the theology is never attenuated. As a result, his non-academic writings, while reflecting his theological approach of dialoguing with the culture, uphold his principle that the Gospel message is never to be compromised “in the name of the usus delphini and [in] accommodation to one’s hearers.”

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204 Thielicke recognized that theology needed to be “scientific” but not in the empirical sense, but rather in the Wissenschaftlich sense. The Wissenschaftlich approach allows the nature of an object or subject matter to control how it discloses itself, and how the inquirer investigates, thinks about, and comes to understand it. It is not the presuppositions that one imposes on a thing but rather it is a thing’s own unique nature that reveals its reality. Thielicke applied this methodology to theology and anthropology while discounting the empirical approach to investigating these two disciplines. With respect to anthropology, although “certain objectifiable characteristics” can be identified empirically, phenomenal investigation cannot establish the essence of humanity (10). Quantitative measurements do not disclose the qualitative truth of humanity. Similarly, theology “transcends empiricism” (382); the “Christian faith cannot be demonstrated” (9). It is God alone who governs His disclosure. See Thielicke, Thielicke, Being Human... Becoming Human.


206 Ibid., 215. Usus delphini refers to material that is considered inappropriate for reading and thus is expurgated from the text.
4.2 Preaching and Sermons

Although Thielicke was an esteemed professor of systematic theology and the rector of a large university, he always considered preaching to be the “greatest intellectual achievement that [could] be demanded of any theologian.”207 He recognized that preaching, along with the demands of theological study, required other skills and faculties. He came to realize that, unlike an academic lecture, communicating the faith in a conversational manner, finding the colloquial expression that was just right, or creating a vivid image in the listener’s mind was hard work. The audience was diverse with respect to education, emotions, and expectations; in addition, each listener apprehended sermons differently. Therefore preaching needed to address “the whole person;” it needed to be directed not only to the “intellect but at the same time aimed at the conscience, will, and imagination.”208 Preaching was also risky because the medium had its limitations. Its language and its very content did not allow for “qualifying and safeguarding clauses”—after all one dare not attempt to qualify and safeguard God who is “Wholly Other.”209

4.2.1 Anthropological and Christological

Correlative to our thesis that Thielicke’s theological anthropology reflected his modern theological approach is that his preaching often spotlighted this aspect of God’s grace to address the people’s common existential anxieties and the diverse manifestations of those anxieties.

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207 Thielicke, Notes from a Wayfarer, 291. Despite this assertion Thielicke was “not exactly happy” by the fact that his reputation as a preacher far eclipsed that as an academic theologian (295). However, he does acknowledge that he could not have written his eight volumes of systematic theology without the spiritual experiences he received from his preaching exercises.

208 Ibid., 292.

While his proclamation was always firmly Christological, he recognized that the concerns of those in the pews also needed to be the subject of his sermon. Thielicke did not want listeners to exit the church thinking “I was not there in that sermon” or asking “Who was the preacher talking about anyway?” He believed that preaching that simply spoke about “heaven and hell,” which did not engage “the agnostic, atheist and secular idealist,” and the things and relationships common to all of humanity, had a limited audience. Thielicke considered it a crisis in the modern Church that preaching was not anthropological: it was not addressing the loss of identity, alienation, and depersonalization, or how these internal anxieties expressed themselves as external fears which he maintained afflicted the German people. Thielicke saw that beneath those fears and anxieties lay a latent religious question that preaching needed to bring into the orbit of the biblical message. Concisely put, and as pertains well to our thesis, Thielicke stated:

The problems… (e.g. anxiety, boredom, pressures at work) stand at the center of life. To reach this center, we must address these problems. We must deal with anthropological themes in our preaching, or, more sharply, we must show that the theological themes of creation, the fall, and redemption stand in basic relation to the anthropological questions that are put to us here and now.

However, while preaching needed to reflect humanity’s awareness of its temporal situation, this awareness must never “change, distort, or completely absorb the theological contents”; it must

210 Thielicke, *Being Human… Becoming Human*, 100.
213 Ibid., 105
always be grounded in a Gospel-informed theo-anthropology.\textsuperscript{214} To address society’s search for meaning and nihilism’s abandonment of meaning, Thielicke proclaimed that the Gospel alone imparts the God-ordered meaning to life. Preaching needed to actualize the Gospel, not accommodate it. Thielicke’s preaching, like his anthropology, is therefore Christocentric. Preaching proclaims the mighty acts of God and how His grace is made manifest to the listener in the benefits of Christ.\textsuperscript{215} Thielicke, as pastor, saw firsthand that preaching needed to make Christ’s benefits known. Having ministered during the war, he was aware that someone may be sitting in the pew for the last time “and I must give them emergency rations.”\textsuperscript{216} His sermons, therefore, revolved around these benefits: the manger, the cross, and the empty tomb. Bromiley, translator of many of Thielicke’s works, acknowledged that Thielicke was not primarily an expositor of Scripture, or a biblical exegete, but his message was “supremely the biblical word, declared with almost prophetic authority, and finding its focus and center in Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{217} Thielicke’s idiosyncratic pronouncements were firmly grounded in Christ (as attested by Scripture) and the benefits that He bestows on believers, however urgent the need for a particular angle-of-vision in pulpit proclamation at that time in Germany’s history. The content of his sermons on theological anthropology (as well as other sermons) are an example of this urgency.\textsuperscript{218}

\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 106.
\textsuperscript{215} Thielicke, \textit{The Evangelical Faith: Volume II}, 330.
\textsuperscript{216} Thielicke, \textit{The Trouble with the Church}, 24. Thielicke’s point is not exaggerated. He recounts how once while involved in the clean-up of an aerial bombing that had killed many he was approached by a woman whose husband had also been recently killed in an attack. Clutching her husband’s hat, she had sought out Thielicke to say, “Only last Thursday I was with him, attending your lecture. And now I want to thank you for preparing him for his death”. See Thielicke, \textit{Man in God’s World}, 10.
\textsuperscript{217} Thielicke, \textit{The Silence of God}, vi.
\textsuperscript{218} Thielicke’s sermons took on another form of urgency during the early years of the war when he observed that his parishioners were ill-equipped to face the evil that had been foisted upon them. The war and the Nazis had resulted in many having no faith: for them “the Bible was \textit{terra incognita”}. See Thielicke, \textit{Notes from a Wayfarer}, 150.
4.2.2 Engaging the Modern Culture

It is therefore in Thielicke’s sermons that we get the best understanding of the post-war German experience and the people’s psyche. His analysis of the *Sitz im Leben* is often anecdotal and reflects the first-hand experiences of a committed pastor.\(^{219}\) Thielicke’s sermons reflect his theological approach in that he engaged the modern culture. He listened before he spoke. His sermons reflect someone who was continually in conversation with the diverse members of his congregation and the larger community. Like the Apostle Paul, he was a Greek to the Greeks, and a Jew to the Jews. Although Thielicke saw his conversations as opportunities to gather sermon material, they were never meant to be self-serving, but pastoral. His conversations exemplified the act of encounter and living in fellowship with others. Consequently, Thielicke spoke with credibility from the pulpit because he spoke with sincerity beyond it. His audience lent him their ears because he had lent them his.

Having listened to the questions and concerns of the people, Thielicke responded in much the same language as they did. He realized that it is not only *what* you say but *how* you say it.\(^{220}\) He conveyed the Gospel in a manner, and with a vocabulary that was accessible and intelligible while still remaining faithful to the biblical message. It was not only the sermon’s theme (i.e., Christological anthropology) but also its style of delivery that reflected his approach of engaging

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Thielicke realized that before he could give a Christian response to the people’s suffering, he first needed to instruct them in the basics of the Christian faith.

\(^{219}\) As Footnote 69 indicated, Thielicke, as a national personality, received correspondence from all over Germany and from people in all walks of life who described to him their own particular *Sitz im Leben*.

the culture. Thielicke felt that “real fidelity” is achieved only when the Gospel truth addresses temporal questions and when it does so using contemporary vocabulary.\textsuperscript{221}

To address the need for intelligibility Thielicke dispensed with the traditional language of theology and the church, and instead employed popular expressions and vivid imagery.\textsuperscript{222} He was bothered by the stock-in-trade religious phrases and dogmatic clichés that often got bandied about in pulpits without adequate explanation. Thielicke realized theological jargon and abstract concepts, if not properly explained, do not aid in addressing the practical questions and concrete realities of people’s lives.\textsuperscript{223} Naturally, Thielicke did not downplay the importance of theological concepts but he believed that only a vernacular translation of them would rouse his listeners. He considered that words such as “sin,” “grace,” and “justification” not only have been misinterpreted; they even produce “a kind of Christian gobbledygook that never gets under anybody’s skin.”\textsuperscript{224} Instead, he realized that what does get under people’s skin and strikes them

\textsuperscript{221} Thielicke, \textit{The Evangelical Faith: Volume I}, 121.

\textsuperscript{222} Thielicke was not always the popular preacher whose Sunday services attracted thousands and whose sermon books sold millions. Things were a little different early in his career when the young Thielicke, who possessed a doctorate in theology and also one in philosophy, was ministering to the small pastorate in Swabia in southern Germany. One can only imagine how the poor pious parishioners responded to the preaching of the scholar turned vicar who “would descend into the depths of profundity and move simultaneously in the rarified air of pure intellectuality.” Such an approach might have worked in the lectern but it would not do in the pulpit. So it was upon the advice of the notable Swiss theologian Emil Brunner that the young vicar make himself more intelligible to ordinary folks by toning down considerably his academic dissection and analysis of theological points. See Thielicke, \textit{Notes from a Wayfarer}, 131-2.

\textsuperscript{223} To emphasize this point, Thielicke recalled a classmate at seminary who once uttered “our sinful flesh” and was sharply rebuked by the professor and forbidden from using “such parrot-fashion repetitions of pseudo pastoral clichés.” See Thielicke, \textit{Notes from a Wayfarer}, 55.

\textsuperscript{224} Thielicke, \textit{The Trouble with the Church}, 3. Rueger observes that in place of the word, \textit{Sünde} (sin), Thielicke often uses the word, \textit{Schuld} (guilt). He contends that \textit{Schuld} was a “safer word” for Thielicke to use in reaching those people less familiar with the language of the Church while presenting to them a “more readily acceptable idea of the human problem.” Rueger, \textit{Individualism in the Christology of Helmut Thielicke’s Sermons: Analysis and Response}, 13.
radically is the biblical truth spoken in worldly terms. By speaking the Christian message in everyday language “we make it clear that the content of what we say is different, that God is the ‘Wholly Other.’” Thielicke always maintained that “accommodation in speech” was not the same as “accommodation in substance.” This was a crucial point from which Thielicke never departed.

Thielicke’s attempt to achieve solidarity with the culture while maintaining solidarity with Scripture in his sermons was a further example of his modern—better yet—his actualization approach to doing theology. A description of this approach—from “the culture” itself—states it well. The secular news magazine, Der Spiegel, in its cover story on Thielicke and his preaching at St. Michaelis cathedral, observed—and perhaps to the journalist’s surprise:

He speaks in front of people, who have read their newspapers, about what they have read in the newspapers. He explains the biblical reading for that day using current events from politics and the economy. He knows the newsreels; he knows the language of the ordinary German; he knows the West German citizen. He knows about this world and he uses this knowledge to talk to his audience about the next world.

To illustrate the power of translating theological language into the vernacular, Thielicke gives a rather severe but apt example of a Christian who, disgusted by what he hears at a pro-Nazi rally, shouts out that “Christ is the Messiah” and is met with nothing more than passive indifference, while another similarly disgusted Christian shouts out “Christ is the only Lord and Leader and without him Hitler and all the apostles of this false faith will go to hell.” The second proclamation is the same as the first but the second Christian is met with a very different response and likely an unfortunate earthly fate. See Thielicke, Encounter with Spurgeon, 34.

Helmut Thielicke, The Trouble with the Church, 18.

Thielicke, How the World Began, 306.

“Thielicke - Kanzel und Katheder,” Der Spiegel, December 21, 1955, 34. http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-31971844 [accessed November 28, 2015 – my translation]. Der Spiegel is a German weekly news journal akin to Time magazine and continues to be published today. Thielicke was the subject of numerous articles in Der Spiegel in the 1950s and 60s.
4.2.3 Preaching on the Prodigal Son and the Waiting Father

While developing his notion God’s grace to the *Sitz im Leben*, Thielicke recognized that the situation in Germany at the time to be not unlike the themes found in the Bible. He maintained that the existential anxieties and anthropological questions of modern humanity had been taken up long ago in the accounts in Genesis and the encounters of Jesus. He observed this particularly in Jesus’ parables, and he believed that modern readers should see in a parable’s characters a reflection of their own lives; that in reading the parables one is “gazing at [one’s] own portrait.”

For Thielicke, the theme of human identity and destiny is well illustrated in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The prodigal’s venture into the far country was really a search for himself, says Thielicke, and for what the young man believed “freedom” to be. Rejecting his father’s authority, the son soon finds himself subject to other “authorities:” his ambitions, passions, impulses, and also his fears and anxieties. Thielicke recognized that the prodigal’s perceived pleasures were really oppressions, and were not unlike the diversions and worldly relations of the *Wirtschaftswunder’s* “far country.” Later, the prodigal’s predicament suggests the totalitarian regimes and exploitive attitudes of the modern era when he falls under the control of someone “who has no interest in him” [and] for whom he hardly exists.

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231 Thielicke, *Being Human... Becoming Human*, 218.
Thielicke continues to parallel the biblical story with the *Sitz im Leben* when he refers to the prodigal’s squandering of his inheritance as an example of how the present generation has perverted God’s gifts of technical skill, creativity, and reason. Yet, Thielicke reminds his readers that whatever our sins, whatever our squandering, “God pays no regard to what I have *lost*; he thinks only of what I *am*.”233 Still Thielicke also cautions his audience that just as our squandering does not define us, neither does our striving. It is not the prodigal son’s qualities and his actions—his newly found maturity and his coming to his senses—that endear him to his father. It is because of the father’s grace that he is welcomed home. It is the faithfulness of Christ that opens the Father’s house, and that alone is the reason the prodigal can enter it.234

Rueger observes that in preaching on the prodigal, Thielicke attempts to highlight modern humanity’s “misguided autonomy.”235 Although this in part may be Thielicke’s objective, he makes it clear that his goal is not to emphasize the follies of immoral living. Instead, he seeks to proclaim that we are children of God and, like the prodigal, our home and true freedom is a life committed to Him. It is only with God in Christ that we find our true selves and our true destiny.

Thielicke maintained that this parable from Luke’s gospel so closely reflects the modern human situation that one can “read the whole story in the first person.”236 His preaching on this parable reflected his theological approach: engaging a contemporary concern in light of the eternal Gospel, and responding with a specific application of God’s grace. Thielicke observed for his own era the implications of the anthropological reality of the prodigal, “who was dead and is

233 Ibid., 39.
234 Ibid., 28.
alive again.” In a similar manner, we can observe the implications of Thielicke’s approach, and specifically his anthropology, for our era. It is to these implications to which we now turn.
Chapter 5
Implications for the *Sitz im Leben* Today

As the *Der Spiegel* journalist noted, Thielicke knew the West Germans, but would the theologian know them (and the West in general) today? In his preface to *Being Human... Becoming Human*, originally published in 1976, Thielicke warned that he is not writing for the year 2010, but rather for the interests and concerns of his contemporaries. While theology articulates the truth of the Gospel in light of the human perversity, problems, and perplexities found in all eras, theology also must articulate the Gospel’s engagement with the challenges and opportunities that arise on account of any one era’s historical particularities. As such, with his comment in *Being Human... Becoming Human*, Thielicke appears to reckon that the interests of the 21st century may not reflect the particular challenges of his era. And yet looking back at his wartime sermons in Germany, Thielicke recognized that they were relevant for peacetime audiences in the United States. He observed that the anthropological concerns of 1960s America were not materially unlike those of 1940s Germany. Although many of the details of the *Sitz im Lebens* were dissimilar they raised similar challenges and issues because of the underlying universal condition of sin.

237 Thielicke, *Being Human... Becoming Human*, 1.
Thielicke observed his era’s pervasive patent and latent search for identity and meaning. Is the situation any different today? And therefore is Thielicke’s work still relevant? Bromiley contends that Thielicke’s sermons will “lose much of their point and thrust if we are privileged to pass out of the present storms into a calmer historical epoch.”\(^{239}\) But have we been so privileged? I contend that the existential situation in today’s world is not unlike 1940s Germany or 1960s America. Thielicke contended that every era elicits new theological themes because of its particular challenges. It was the challenges raised by the wartime and post-war German *Sitz im Leben* that prompted Thielicke to emphasize theological anthropology in his preaching and popular writings. The depersonalization and alienation that he witnessed at that time continue to be a concern today. Similarly, the search for, or the making of, meaning in the world remain a concern for many. Our postmodern culture insists that there is no absolute universal meaning and purpose to life. Rather, meaning is varied and relative; it is what you make it. And being alienated from our ultimate relation, we therefore seek both meaning and escape from our search for meaning in an array of penultimate relations. Then having given ourselves over to these relations, we come to be controlled by them (as I indicate in the next several pages). Humanity’s relations today are not unlike those of Thielicke’s time while the underlying sinful condition from which they arise is identical to his era. Consequently, Thielicke’s overall approach of engaging modern challenges—but without accommodating to them—and his specific thinking on theological anthropology are worth appropriating for our contemporary culture.

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\(^{239}\) Thielicke, *The Silence of God*, vi.
5.1 The *Sitz im Leben* Today

Although anthropology is complex and multi-faceted, and every era finds itself challenged anew, humanity’s sinful condition remains and therefore so does the human person’s concern about identity and destiny. “Who am I?” “What is the meaning and purpose of my life?” “How should I live my life?” These are questions that disturb us still, either consciously or unconsciously. The cultural critic Wesley Morris, writing in *The New York Times*, calls 2015 “the year we were obsessed with identity.”[^240] It was a year in which stories about gender identity (i.e., Caitlyn Jenner) and racial identity (i.e., Rachel Dolezal) made the headlines. Alissa Wilkinson, in a recent article for *Christianity Today* entitled “The Year [2015] We Searched for Ourselves,” writes: “The cultural importance of finding your “authentic self” [begun in the 1960s]… is now reaching its peak.”[^241] The search for authenticity may be a current obsession but material possessions and a pleasurable lifestyle remain as superficial modes of self-identification, self-expression, and self-worth in our consumerist culture.

The existential questions and concerns are not limited to the personal level. The wider culture is also asking “What does it mean to be human?” Thomas Johnson, theologian and ethicist observes: “Our civilization lacks a coherent explanation of what we are as humans, and this unanswered question casts a shadow across politics, business, finance, education, the arts, and medicine.”[^242] Similarly, Schwoebel observes that although the concept of human dignity is a

universal principle its varying expressions and their practical implementation are not only incoherent but contested. As an example, he notes that both sides of the debate over the medical use of human embryos claim to uphold human dignity.\textsuperscript{243}

In his era, Thielicke observed that technology can denigrate persons and obscure human identity. The major threat it posed remains. Developments in biotechnology and genetic engineering, and technological advancements in computer simulation and artificial intelligence and consciousness have begun to blur the lines between machine and the human being.\textsuperscript{244} As theologian Elaine Graham observes, while “post-biological” components (i.e., artificial limbs and organs) can offer improvements to a person’s quality of life, “post-bodied” experiences (i.e., virtual reality) diminish the integrity of the human body and the reality of human relations.\textsuperscript{245} Gender selection and gene manipulation confer human worth on gender and attributes, not on the person as a whole. They reduce the person to a role, a functionary or a desired particular characteristic. Graham observes further that while some proponents of genetic modification and cybernetic technology aspire to transcend human embodiment and contingency—“the ‘end’ of the

\textsuperscript{243} Schwoebel, “Recovering Human Dignity,” 45.
human”—she recognizes that developments whose aim is “hyper-humanism” or “transhumanist superiority” may pose a real threat to human identity and dignity: “the end of the ‘human.’”

We have seen that in his era Thielicke also observed the existential anxiety brought on by homelessness. That threat also remains. The refugees from Africa and the Middle East currently inundating Europe are not unlike the DPs from Eastern Europe who poured into Germany following World War II. Military conflicts and political tyrannies continue to uproot and displace people causing not only a refugee crisis but an existential one, too. Whether eking out an existence in a refugee camp or struggling to adjust to a new life in a very strange land far from home, refugees have lost their home and with it part of their identity.

Yet the 21st century equivalents of the materialism, technology, and homelessness that Thielicke witnessed are not the only existential challenges being raised today. As has been noted, questions over gender identity and racial identity and ethnicity (subsets of human identity) are much more commonplace in contemporary culture. The globalization of economic markets also has raised issues about personal identity and purpose. Exporting the production of goods to overseas labour markets where the wages are much lower and the working conditions less regulated is seen to exploit the poor and their desperate need for employment. The negative consequences of

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246 Ibid., 264, 280.
247 Wide-scale homelessness and the potential loss of identity are not confined to refugees or victims of war. Natural disasters can have similar existential effects. A study that looked at how the loss of material possessions and homes impacted the victims of a massive firestorm in California in the 1990s suggested that the loss of personal possessions had resulted in a change in people’s personal identity. See Shay Sayre, “Possessions and Identity Crisis: Meaning and Change for Victims of the Oakland Firestorm,” in NA – Advances in Consumer Research Volume 21, eds. Chris T. Allen and Deborah Roedder John, (Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 1994), 109-114. With the current rise in severe weather due to climate change and the likelihood of increased property destruction, the study’s conclusions would suggest that the loss of homes and possessions has the potential to be an increasing contributor to personal identity crises, particularly in the materialistic West.
economic globalization are also felt in North America when domestic jobs are eliminated. In a society where one’s personal identity and dignity, and life’s purpose are often tied closely to one’s job or career the existential effects of unemployment can be far more devastating than merely the loss of income.

These examples of threats to human identity and dignity in contemporary culture are far from exhaustive, but they are evidence that existential anxiety still remains a challenge. And as such, the challenge provides an opportunity to engage with Thielicke’s theological anthropology which offers a vital and hopeful response. Wilkinson, in the Christianity Today article writes: “In reality, though, we don’t first find ourselves, [and] then participate in relationships. Instead, we were made to know our true selves in relationships.” Wilkinson contends she is interpreting the thinking of the philosopher Charles Taylor, but her point would appear also to be an implicit affirmation of Thielicke’s thought. Thielicke, however, takes the notion of a relational anthropology further by founding it specifically on humanity’s ultimate relation to God. Thielicke remains relevant not because relationality—better yet, onto-relationality—now seems in vogue, but rather because he proclaimed who Christ is and who we are in Him.

Thielicke’s understanding of human relations, our identity in Christ, and the alien dignity that He gives us, provides not only an ontically transformative response to personal existential anxiety; it also impels us the engage ethically with the world. Thielicke understood theological ethics to be the manifestation of our love for God by living in a loving relationship with our neighbour. A Gospel-generated ethics responds to the alien dignity in others. It sees each of God’s children—

the refugee, the elderly, the lonely—not as a burden, but as a blessing. It sees in the mentally challenged, the economically deprived, and the sexually exploited what God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier sees, and in so doing it seeks to remedy the situation. In a world that elevates individualism above all else, that defines human worth based on attributes and abilities, and that demeaningly honours social status and material wealth; against all this Thielicke’s ethics are counter-cultural. Yet, although they may be counter-cultural, the theological ethics, along with the Christological anthropology to which they are fundamentally related, need to be proclaimed to the culture. This form of the “many-splendored” grace of God that Thielicke emphasized to meet the challenges of his day must be recovered for our day.

5.2 Final Thoughts

As previously noted, Thielicke was an admirer of Charles Spurgeon, so much so that he published *Encounter with Spurgeon*. It is a volume of the English preacher’s teachings and sermons, along with Thielicke’s thoughts on the homiletic giant. So fruitful did Thielicke find Spurgeon that he concludes his comments in the volume with the following:

I am almost tempted to shout out to those who are serving the eternal Word as preachers, and to those who are preparing to do so, in what I hope will be a productive hyperbole: Sell all that you have (not least of all some of your stock of current sermonic literature) and buy Spurgeon (even if you have to grub through the second-hand bookstores).²⁴⁹

Perhaps the same can be said of Thielicke. Just as he looked back to an earlier era and found great reward in the Englishman, preachers today and those in the pews and pubs too, might find

²⁴⁹ Thielicke, *Encounter with Spurgeon*, 45.
the same in the German whose anthropology founded on the eternal Gospel certainly retains its relevance for our *Sitz im Leben*. 
Bibliography


