

What Faith Has Meant to Me

Edited by

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Increasingly, in studying the New Testament and especially the Gospels, I have been convinced that salvation is God's work of making us truly human, nothing more and nothing less. To be saved is not to become God, not to become an angel, and not to have life reduced to a fraction or a fragment. It is Christ's work to make the total man well (John 7:23). He laid great emphasis upon sight for the blind, hearing for the deaf, cleansing for the leper, strength for the lame, life for the dead, and the gospel for the poor (Luke 4:16-30; 7:18-23). This means that he was on the side of life, not death; health, not sickness; food for the hungry, not hoarding it all for the favored few. He was on the side of peace, not war. He was on the side of purity, integrity, and humble trust in God, not on the side of arrogance, pride, and self-worship or self-service.

I have also been driven by New Testament study and by increasing awareness of the world's needs to focus my ministry more on the care of God's good earth instead of on pollution and depletion.

To sum it up: the '30s was the decade of finding a basic sense of direction and laying foundations in study and ministry. The '40s brought home to me the trauma of race relations and war. The late '40s and early '50s were the years of struggle with my own mind and conscience for academic integrity and with obscurants for freedom to read, to write, and to speak. The middle '60s brought to crushing force the issues of war and peace which had been only partially awake since the early '40s. The late '60s brought the "moment of truth" about ecology, with our gross guilt of sin against nature and the absolute demand that our course be reversed. All along the way was concern for the poor, in part because I lived through the Depression in the '30s and in part because one can hardly wear the covers off many Greek New Testaments without finally becoming sensitized to its great concern for the material as well as the higher needs of mankind.

Helmut Thielicke

HELMUT THIELICKE WAS BORN IN BARMEN IN 1908. His early studies at Greifswald, Marburg, Erlangen, and Bonn were frequently interrupted by long stays in clinical hospitals. He was awarded the Ph.D. degree by the University of Erlangen in 1931, and became professor of theology at the University of Heidelberg in 1936. Because of his outspoken views concerning the relationship of church and state he was expelled from that position in 1940.

He became pastor of the Lutheran church in Ravensburg with restriction on travel and writing. He then became head of the Theological Office of the Württemberg Church, and in 1945 was professor of systematic theology at the University of Tübingen. In 1954 he moved to the same chair at the University of Hamburg, where he still serves. He has honorary degrees from the Universities of Heidelberg and Glasgow, and was awarded the Great Cross for services to the Republic of Germany.

His writing has been prolific, totaling over seventy titles. His works have been translated into twelve languages. Among those available in English are his two-volume work entitled *Theological Ethics, Nihilism: Its Origin and Nature with a Christian Answer, The Trouble with the Church, I Believe: The Christian's Creed, and Death and Life*.

God Reached Into My Life

HELMUT THIELCKE
Translated by Dr. James L. Blevins

AS A SMALL BOY, I WISHED IN VAIN FOR A LITTLE WAGON SO that I could play "bus" with it. Finally the longed-for hour arrived when my grandmother took pity on me and bought me a very beautiful little wagon. With an indescribable happiness, I pulled it home, but was too small to lift it up the steps alone. Then as my father lifted it over his head and ran up the steps, I broke into tears. My father did not understand and rebuked me: "Silly boy, you have just gotten a new wagon, and instead of being happy, you begin to bawl. What is wrong with you?" I answered him, "Someday it's going to break down!"

That was, if you see it that way, my first religious experience. Although I was still small and had no idea of life, there suddenly came over me a knowledge of perishableness. Precisely because I loved my wagon so, the thought that it would not belong to me forever but would, rather, end up someday at the garbage dump caused me to shudder. This knowledge of the perishableness of things has been with me ever since and has affected me deeply in my theological thought. It has kept me from utopian fantasies, which would lead us to believe, for example, that in this ephemeral world a kingdom of eternal peace might evolve.

Later, as a student, I was personally confronted by the problem of mortality. At twenty years of age I became seriously ill, with an internal infection, and could get around only in a wheelchair. I waited for my death. When the doctors released me to go home for the final round of my life, they openly made

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known to me their helplessness. One of them read to me a medical evaluation of my disease in which the following sentence appeared: "If no medication is found in a few months, he will certainly die a very painful death."

After a while, the same doctor wrote me that they were experimenting with a new medication that might possibly be of help to me. After the futile attempts of the past, he would of course give me no great hopes. If I were ready for one last try, he would be very glad to treat me one time with the new medication. After all my past disappointments, I could not at first decide to do it. Only because of my despairing mother did I let myself be brought once again into the hospital. I was not a Christian at that time; I was more a fatalist, resigned to accept what would be and to bury all the hopes of youth.

On the medicine bottle were the words, "Danger, Poison!" The reason for this was that the medication was not yet on the market, but would be first used experimentally at university clinics. Therefore the doctors decided to use it in small, carefully guarded doses. They were uncertain about the intensity of its effect.

I still remember it exactly. It was the *green* Thursday of the year of 1933, as the noise of the demonstration of the Nazis, who had just come into power, pressed into the stillness of my hospital room. Then the chief doctor said to me: "My dear Thielcke, you must realize, just as we doctors sorrowfully perceive, that this medication also does not help. We do not want to detain you further. You can now be taken home again. If you wish, you can wait until tomorrow morning. At least you will be home again for Easter."

Then when I was alone—very much alone—I looked at the bottle on which the word "Poison!" was written and from which I had been taking only a few drops daily. In an act of despairing decision, I drank the whole bottle and said to myself: Either it will kill you quickly and save you a painful, slow death, or this overdose will work and make you healthy. That was certainly a naïve view of the alternatives, but that was the way I saw my situation at that time.

When I had finished the bottle, my glance fell on the crucifix, which the nuns had hung in my room. (I took it with me later, and it still hangs in my study.) At that time, Christ was still a stranger to me, but I saw in the cross the picture of his suffering as well as his compassion. I experienced him as my brother and companion and spoke with him. To be sure, I could not rise up to the promise, "This day, you will be with me in Paradise." Though it meant much to me that he also was in the crisis of death. Under this cross I came to terms with my life. I know though that I also asked for forgiveness. With a deep peace, I tried to sleep. I thought: Perhaps you will never awaken again; also, perhaps, you will get well. I had now placed this matter in another hand and let myself rely on it.

That was my first meeting with Christ. It was a very modest one: I had not seen his countenance, but rather touched only a little of the hem of his garment. But it was just as it was in the New Testament: He had felt the touch and turned around to me. Although at that time I was hardly aware of it.

When I awakened, I marveled first of all that I was still alive. I felt a strange, not completely definable vitality, even though the paralysis was still there. My confession of what I had done caused great alarm in the clinic. Since no one knew what the outcome might be, I was scolded terribly and made responsible for all the consequences. But that did not bother me a great deal.

On the following day, I took a few difficult steps, supported by my mother. I got along better every day. After four weeks I marched normally out of that place and as a well person went to the university in order to write my doctoral thesis in theology. Even now after four decades I must take this medicine daily, but I have no more trouble at all. I was even able to get a certificate in sports activities.

It is certainly understandable that this miracle, which seemed outwardly to be entirely within the laws of science, signified a dividing line in the history of my faith. In spite of this, I could not speak of a "conversion" that could be dated exactly as to time. It was rather as if the water level in my life

gradually rose and transformed the wasteland of nihilism into a fruitful landscape.

This process actually was a very slow one. In spite of this experience, I was still first of all a novice theologian. Although I had concluded my studies, and was already a Doctor of Philosophy, I had never preached. I attached myself to the university only and was a pure scientist. When I was asked at school about my study plans, I answered the teacher, "I want to study theology." To this he said, "Therefore, you want to be a minister." However, I turned that off indignantly and said, "That I want to avoid if at all possible." Later my schoolmates often reminded me of this remark.

But at that time, I felt exactly so about it. In spite of my Christian upbringing, I was not a Christian. I felt closer to the Greek gods, which I knew very well from my classical studies in high school, than to the Father of Jesus Christ. I was deeply moved by the question concerning the meaning of life, chance and necessity, freedom and the responsibility of man. Theoretically, I wanted to investigate these problems thoroughly. For that reason, I could have studied philosophy. However, as an eighteen-year-old, I said to myself, even the theologians have pondered these questions from time immemorial. They ponder these things not from the point of view of a "clever loner" but rather within the framework of their Christian community. They have not wrestled just theoretically with these problems within the confines of their offices, but rather they have struggled with each other. They have run the risk of physical destruction on the funeral pyre, or under the ax of the executioner. In general, that cannot be said of philosophers. It must have been a very serious matter for the theologians, although for me the problems which concerned them at that time—such as in the framework of the doctrine of the Trinity—appeared very subtle. That the thinkers of the church felt so responsible for their truth impressed me. For that reason, I believed that they were partners in harmonious dialogue. I wanted to discover whether their truth might be capable of bearing the weight of a life built upon it.

With my hospital experience behind me and now being already touched seriously by Christian faith, I still remained to a great extent in the field of pure science and avoided the pulpit. I thought that I might preach when I had achieved full clarity in the realm of thought. That was a standpoint which I today hold as absolutely false. For proclamation does not have its origin in theology, but rather exactly the opposite. The preaching of the gospel, which gives us the happiness of faith, is always the first. It is not until God has so moved us that our thought apparatus also switches on, and we ask: What does this all mean? How do the statements of faith concerning the word, history, nature, and man fit together with what science and my reason say to me? It would be terrible if God should have nothing to do with all of that and kept himself only in the "religious province" and be allowed to demand only our pious feelings.

Therefore I had ended up in a blind alley when I thought that I could achieve clarity concerning God outside the field of proclamation relying only on theoretical endeavors. From such blind alleys, one seldom finds his way out alone. For that reason, a higher hand had to reach once again into my life, even as it had happened in my room at the clinic.

Because I belonged to the Confessing Church and attacked the Nazis with youthful recklessness, I was expelled from my teaching positions at the University of Heidelberg. One of my friends said to me that I could have actually avoided this decree. I could have done so while remaining true to my convictions in a way that would not have irritated the Nazis. He expressed it very nicely with reference to the Bible: "God may well have ordered Daniel fearlessly to stir up the lions' den. He did not order him also to pull the hair of these wild beasts nor to pinch them on the tail." Such I had already done time and again.

Even so, I suddenly found myself and my wife sitting in the street without a job. Also my salary for the moment was stopped. In order to earn my keep, I had to find work again. What else should come to mind but a preaching position, for

which I had always studied? At first no one wanted to take me because as an "enemy of the state" I would be a burden to the church. Finally, the honorable Bishop Wurm took me into his church and hid me away in a rather remote location on Lake Constance. Since I was forbidden by the secret police to leave this place of my activity, forbidden to speak anywhere on the outside, and was not allowed to publish a printed line, I was able to—and had to—concentrate completely on my congregation. Now I had to preach.

Today I know this happening brought about a decisive turning point in my life. I noticed that the proclaimed word touched men, that it afforded solace in the horrors of war, and that through it confused and oppressed human beings gained a new hold. After all the years of abstract thought, I took great pains to make myself understandable to simple people and especially to win the hearts of youth. I sought for illustrative pictures and parables, concerned myself with plain, natural speech and noticed suddenly that the saying was true: To whom God gives a position, he also gives understanding. Now I learned to comprehend the happiness of standing in the middle of a congregation and speaking every Sunday to the assembled members.

Later, I was transferred to Stuttgart. There I spoke in the middle of the bombing raids to a church of thousands and noticed how much one's own faith is strengthened when one witnesses faith given to a brother or a sister who stands on the same foundations.

Later, God reached once again into the experience of my faith—just two years ago. Up to that time I always stood as the soloist at the pulpit. I suffered from the fact that the people sometimes were concentrating too much on my person. Recently I found a young associate, who willingly wanted to learn from my experiences. Along with him, I have built up a group who together act and proclaim. We set aside ten evenings at the Michaelis Church in Hamburg for a course in faith for adults. We experienced joy in the fact that people poured in, especially young people.

But we did not want to stand merely on words, we also wanted to do an active service for the kingdom of God. So we went into a prison and concerned ourselves with the prisoners, stood by those who were released as they took their first steps of freedom. We gathered together drug addicts and juvenile delinquents and sought to help them in the name of Jesus.

At present we are working on a course in how to write testimonies of faith. Beginning in September, a hundred thousand copies will be sent across our land. It is our purpose that they will also appear in America.

Through this work together I perceive a wonderful fulfilling of my life. I am passing on the torch, so to speak, and am placing it in young hands. We safeguard ourselves from empty activity. No meeting passes without placing our circle under the word of God. Before we can give to others, we must first of all receive. Before we speak out in the world, we must have spent time at the throne of God. We stay busy in composing the testimony letters, discussing theology with one another, and often there is heated discussion. We do not remain in theoretical corners; rather, we let the process of our thought go on to the hearing. We eat and drink together. Our fellowship is cheerful and casual. There is no deeper happiness than being able to have faith and to be bound up with those who stand on the same foundation of life.

K. Owen White

K. OWEN WHITE WAS BORN IN LONDON, BUT HIS family moved to British Columbia when he was five years old. He was a Canadian until he attended the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. He holds his B.A. degree from the University of Louisville, and Th.B., Th.M., and Ph.D. degrees from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville.

His first pastorate was the First Baptist Church of Santa Monica, California. He was later pastor of Baptist churches in Gainesville and Atlanta, Georgia, in Washington, D.C., in Little Rock, Arkansas, and of the First Baptist Church in Houston, Texas. He was a member for eleven years, and vice-president for five years, of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. In addition to service on various committees of the General and State Conventions of the Southern Baptists, he was president of the General Convention in 1963-1964. Before his retirement he was coordinator of Metropolitan missions in Los Angeles.

In addition to numerous articles in denominational publications and study lessons and program materials written for the Sunday School Board of his denomination he has written several books, including *Studies in Hosea*, *The Book of Jeremiah*, *Nehemiah Speaks Again*. The pastorate was always the focus of his interest and his first love, and in it he served for over forty years.