

Person and Work: In Search of Theological Convergence

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WHEN *Veritatis Splendor* was released by Pope John Paul II twenty years ago, I raised—from the perspective of the Reformation—some critical questions about it. But I also acknowledged that it was hard to imagine any Protestant church body in our day producing an equally searching examination of the nature of the Christian life and Christian moral reflection. Hence, I judged that those whose moral vision had been shaped by the Reformation had good reason to be grateful for the encyclical.¹

Two decades later I think much as I did then. Certain questions that came to the fore at the time of the Reformation are important enough that they never go away and never cease to be puzzling. It is no surprise that John Paul forces us to think about them. My aim here, therefore, is to think again about one important issue in Christian moral theology, an issue explicitly treated in *Veritatis Splendor*. It is what the encyclical calls fundamental choice (or option), which in Reformation perspective we might call the problem of the relation of person and work.

In order to reflect upon this, I will set the position articulated by John Paul II over against one of the most substantial works of Lutheran ethics from the twentieth century—Helmut Thielicke's *Theological Ethics*.²

¹ Gilbert Meilaender, "Veritatis Splendor: Reopening Some Questions of the Reformation," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 23 (Fall 1995): 225–38.

² Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics, Volume I: Foundations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1966), xii. Future references to this volume will be by page number within the body of the text. Of course, Thielicke's is an individual work of scholarship, not an ecclesiastical document intended authoritatively to instruct the faithful. In that sense the two are not comparable. But *Veritatis Splendor* is something more

Thielicke himself believed that his attempt to write an ethic from a Lutheran perspective constituted “a new subject matter which Reformation theology, to its hurt, has thus far avoided—though Roman Catholic theology has always found a place for it. The need now is to make up for several centuries of neglect.” Even if he succeeded only partially in that aim, as I think is the case, it is worth asking whether, or to what degree, his angle of vision and that of *Veritatis Splendor* may converge.

The Problem

Veritatis Splendor distinguishes a choice to act in some particular way from a more general determination of oneself for (or against) God.³ In itself this seems unproblematic, but the distinction is radicalized in the notion of a fundamental option in which one’s overall self-determination is not just distinguished from but seemingly separated from the particular choices and actions of the person.⁴ And if it is persons, not isolated actions, who are called to fellowship with God, then we might begin to suppose that the person must be judged in terms of that fundamental self-determination, “prescinding in whole or in part from his choice of particular actions, of concrete kinds of behavior” (§65). This possibility *Veritatis Splendor* characterizes as a “radical revision of the *relationship between person and acts*” (§65).

Using the language of the New Testament we could say that “faith” opens us freely and entirely to call God good. “There is no doubt,” John Paul writes, “that Christian moral teaching, even in its Biblical roots, acknowledges the specific importance of a fundamental choice which qualifies the moral life and engages freedom on a radical level before God. It is a question of the decision of faith, of the *obedience of faith* (cf. Rom. 16:26) ‘by which man makes a total and free self-commitment to God . . .’” (§66). Of this commitment St. Paul writes (Rom. 14:23) that “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” At least in that sense the character of the person determines the quality of the work.

than authoritative instruction. It is also a searching essay in moral theory (and in that sense a rather unusual encyclical).

³ *The Splendor of Truth* (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1993), §65. Future references to the encyclical will be by paragraph number within the body of the text.

⁴ Cf., for example, the following statement from Josef Fuchs’s discussion of *Veritatis Splendor*: “The encyclical attacks the idea that the moral quality of individual acts may be determined only by the intention and the fundamental option of the person concerned (67). Then it states that every particular act involves some reference to good or evil. But who would wish to deny this? The problem is how this relates to the ethical status of the person as a whole, which is on another level.” Josef Fuchs, “Good Acts and Good Persons,” in *Understanding Veritatis Splendor*, ed. John Wilkins (London: SPCK, 1994), 24.

But what follows from that? Could we also say that any action which does proceed from faith—anything done by one who has made a fundamental choice for God— must be God-pleasing rather than sinful? That surely does not follow, but it does point to our problem, to the difficulty of relating person and work.⁵ For if we hold, as Thielicke does, that the character of a person depends on whether he is or is not in right relation with God, and if we also say that the character of the person determines the moral quality of his works, then we might seem committed to thinking that the actions of anyone whose basic determination is that of faith must be good actions.

Thielicke raises this issue very early in his *Ethics*, and he does so, interestingly enough, when discussing the story—so central to the discussion in *Veritatis Splendor*—of the rich young man who comes to Jesus inquiring about what is good (31–32). His reading of the exchange focuses on the “person” of the young man. While *Veritatis Splendor* characterizes the encounter as one in which Jesus directs the man into “a moral and spiritual journey towards perfection” (§15), Thielicke suggests that Jesus aims to free the man from bondage to himself in order that he may be bound to God. Jesus does this through a “movement of concentration” in which all imperatives become forms of the command to love God wholly and entirely.

Particular acts seem to disappear, faith in God occupies the entire moral field, and Thielicke himself sees the difficulty. “We must therefore put the question quite pointedly. Does not all ethical reflection always involve an act whereby ethics really does away with itself by reducing the ethical question to a problem that is essentially dogmatic? . . . In short, does not the solution of the ethical problem lie in the dissolution of ethics?” (32). How we respond to this question will depend on how we understand the claim that a Christian is *simul justus et peccator*.

One way to understand this assertion—often thought to be the Lutheran way but in reality only one of several ways Lutherans have understood it—is to take it to mean that the believer is wholly and entirely saint, and (simultaneously) wholly and entirely sinner. Viewed as one who trusts in the divine goodness and mercy revealed in Jesus, the believer is wholly saint. But viewed apart from that divine goodness, the

⁵ There are moments, however, when Thielicke seems to think that it does follow. Thus, for example, discussing the “personalistic” view that he believes he has taken from Luther, according to which there is “no alternative to being either in fellowship with God or out of fellowship with him,” he asks: “Is it [personalistic thinking] correct when it maintains that there are no intermediate degrees or neutral positions between faith and unbelief, so that ‘whatsoever is not of faith is sin,’ indeed, whatsoever is of faith is righteous?” (251)

believer is entirely sinner. The state of the person seems unrelated to his particular actions, for everything depends on the person's relation to God. The theological task is simply to announce the mercy of God that elicits the fundamental decision of faith—leaving us, in short, with what looks like the dissolution of ethics.

Although the language and thought world are somewhat different, this is not unlike what happens when we think in terms of fundamental option—or, at least, as *Veritatis Splendor* is careful to put it, what fundamental option may become in the hands of “some authors.” Using the language of “right and wrong” to characterize particular actions, and reserving the language of “good and evil” for the fundamental choice that determines the self's orientation toward God, it seems that “the properly moral assessment of the person is reserved to his fundamental option, prescinding in whole or in part from his choice of particular actions, of concrete kinds of behavior” (§65).

John Paul is not the only one dissatisfied with such an approach; Thielicke shares (to some extent) that discontent. The *simul* cannot, he says, be understood to make the act of faith entirely unrelated to what Christians do. It cannot mean that believers are always beginning again, always at the same starting point but never progressing in the Christian life. He describes as “false reasoning” the following statement: “As long as we are never anything but sinners who have received mercy, nothing really changes in our existence as sinners. . . . The only thing that changes, according to this view, is our relationship to our trespasses and sin: they can no longer separate us from God” (41).

At the same time, Thielicke is reluctant—or, perhaps, unable—to say much about how the fundamental act of faith shapes here and now the believer's particular actions. We are caught in the conflict between the old and new ages, a conflict that is eschatological. Ethics always exists in “the field of tension between the old and the new aeons, not in the old alone, nor in the new alone” (43). To try to say more specifically what the shape of the Christian life should be within this tension would be a non-eschatological ethic, which Thielicke associates with Roman Catholicism's attempt to establish “a hierarchy of moral values with a corresponding casuistry of moral action” (44). Hence, he does not move very far or for very long beyond an understanding of the *simul* which he himself has found inadequate. In an eschatological ethic there can be no static “formula for the unity of the Christian's existence,” no rules that can ease the tension between the two ages (45).

In short, if we separate sharply person and work, fundamental option and particular choices of action, we endanger our capacity to make judgments about what is better or worse in the Christian life, and we thereby

endanger our capacity to invite that rich young man into “a moral and spiritual journey towards perfection.” But, of course, if we make the connection between person and work too tight, right action may seem to be a condition that must be met in order to attain God’s favor, a tendency not altogether absent from *Veritatis Splendor*.⁶ That is our problem, and it requires that we think more about what it means to be a moral *agent*.

Agency

To the degree that a person’s fundamental option floats somewhat free of his particular actions, the importance of human agency in the day-to-day demands of life may seem to be undermined. Thielicke notes that, for Luther, going forward and making progress in the Christian life is (sometimes) described simply as beginning again (226). The Christian is always a sinner, but is also always penitent—and hence, always right with God. That is one way to understand the *simul*. There is something very powerful about that picture of the Christian life, and we should not doubt that it can speak powerfully to those who feel themselves deeply divided—drawn by both the lure of sin and the attractiveness of the God revealed in Jesus.

Nevertheless, if in every moment the divided condition of the believer is exactly the same before God, ethical reflection can only point out our failings (whether few or many) and, then, step aside for the message of the gospel to be heard. It is no accident, therefore, that Thielicke should characterize his *Ethics* as an attempt “to lay a new foundation for Christian preaching” (xv).

On such an understanding of the *simul* a Christian who is faithful to his wife even when experiencing temptation and a Christian who is unfaithful to his wife have the same status before God: They are simply sinners in need of forgiveness. And if going forward is just beginning again, there is no reason to distinguish between them. Each is a sinner, each needs to repent and believe, and each may be right with God. What they do, their agency, seems to make no difference in their relation to God. Moment by moment they are reconstituted before God in repentance and faith. Moment by moment they begin again, for there seems to be no agent whose character develops (for better or worse) over time. The person’s existence is entirely momentary and punctual.

⁶ For example: “[T]he performance of good acts, commanded by the One who ‘alone is good,’ constitutes the indispensable condition of and path to eternal blessedness” (§72). Or: “Jesus points out to the young man that the commandments are the first and indispensable condition for having eternal life” (§17). Or: “Jesus himself definitively confirms them [the commandments of the Decalogue] as the way and condition of salvation” (§12).

The problem is just as obvious when we consider the lives of those who are not Christian believers. Thieliicke himself describes the basic issue in several related steps (264–65): If the character of the person determines the quality of the work, and if the character of the person depends on whether one is or is not in right relation with God, then how can the divine commandments tell us anything objective about the will of God?

Suppose a man who has been unfaithful to his wife comes to regret that, is sorry, and recommits himself to his wife and their marriage. Is this not God-pleasing? If we cannot say that it is God-pleasing, then the commandments of God have no significance at all outside the circle of faith. If all we can say is that the (believing or unbelieving) character of the person determines the moral quality of the work, we will be unable to make any quantitative judgments about better or worse actions. The agent exists in splendid isolation from all that he does.

Thieliicke himself recognizes that this cannot be a satisfactory understanding of the Christian life, and he argues that Luther himself did not intend to reject all notions of moral development. “The ego undoubtedly could not be regarded as a subject if it arose each moment by new divine positing, by a continually repeated creation out of nothing.” On the contrary, “‘today, when we hear his voice’ we are not such as have been newly called out of paganism or unbelief and made to stand, as it were, for the first time, as if that ‘today’ were really a new day of creation” (229).

Likewise, *Veritatis Splendor*, for all its emphasis on the person’s development in virtue, does not fail to see that the continual journey toward perfection in love is “a *possibility opened up to man exclusively by grace*, by the gift of God” (§24). Even while affirming that “[i]t is precisely through his acts that man attains perfection as man,” *Veritatis Splendor* says that “[h]uman acts are moral acts because they express and determine the goodness or evil of the individual who performs them” (§71). *Express and determine*. That is to say, on the one hand our actions help to *determine* character, to shape the person we are and become. John Paul states this more explicitly than does Thieliicke. But, on the other hand, our actions also *express* the person we are at the most fundamental level of the self before God—an agency elicited by the gift of God’s grace. And Thieliicke says this more explicitly than does John Paul.

Perhaps we need to say, a little more clearly than *Veritatis Splendor* does, that what God’s commands ask of us is not simply certain actions but a certain kind of agent. They call for a *person* who trusts in God and loves God above all else. But they also offer something to such a person (and we need to say this more clearly than does Thieliicke). God’s commands offer a life that has shape and form, the shape delineated by those

commands. Faith has, as *Veritatis Splendor* puts it, “a moral content. It gives rise to and calls for a consistent life commitment” (89). Committing ourselves in our actions to the life demanded by the moral law can, by God’s grace, help to *determine* us and shape us as persons of faith. Nor is this commitment simply our own. Underlying our own commitment is God’s commitment not to rest until our personal faith is fully *expressed* in our works.

If all this is true, then the connection between person and work must be tighter than Thielicke sometimes seems to have in mind, even if perhaps not quite so tight as it sometimes is in *Veritatis Splendor*. We can detect at least some convergence if we consider Thielicke’s admission that in the Christian life there are “certain limits which cannot be transgressed” (643). This “casuistical minimum” means that person and work cannot be strictly separated. What we do must both express and determine who we are.

Prohibitiva

Thielicke’s concept of a “casuistical minimum” clearly calls to mind the insistence in *Veritatis Splendor* that some acts are intrinsically evil and cannot be otherwise simply because the agent has made a fundamental choice for God. Yet, the list of such acts is rather expansive in *Veritatis Splendor*. Citing *Gaudium et Spes*, the encyclical includes among acts that are always seriously wrong not only rather obvious candidates such as genocide and torture, but also contraception and (under the rubric of whatever offends human dignity) degrading conditions of work, and deportation (§80). If intrinsically evil acts are those that are always gravely evil, entirely apart from their circumstances, expansive lists of such acts are not likely to be persuasive. Here something can be learned from Thielicke.

He comes to this point at several different moments in the long first volume of his *Ethics*. One such moment is when he struggles to make sense of the relation between indicative and imperative in the letters of St. Paul (a problem with which many others have, of course, struggled, and one that probably deserved greater attention than it receives in *Veritatis Splendor*). This is an obvious problem for Thielicke, because the very presence of the imperatives may seem to undermine the indicatives which suggest that God has already redeemed and renewed us through the Spirit of his Son. And once the Spirit has produced the good tree, we might suppose that this tree would “automatically” bring forth good fruit, without any need for imperatives. To be sure, Thielicke does insist that there is something automatic about this—just as, when we give the body food and drink, its organic processes automatically take over to nourish that body (85).

Nevertheless, there are, Thielicke writes, “certain conditions under which, in principle, the work of the Holy Spirit cannot take place” (87). Actions that produce such conditions are *prohibitiva*; they make the Spirit’s work in us impossible. Thielicke suggests that, insofar as every way of life contains possibilities for a kind of “idolatrous bondage,” any way of life has the possibility to become a *prohibitivum* (89). But, taking his cue from the New Testament, he points to three such possibilities in particular: fornication (as a settled way of life, not an individual lapse); eating at the table of demons (that is, attempting to attach oneself both to Christ and to false gods); and denial of the Lord (86–93). Because fornication involves the body, it necessarily involves a giving of oneself. “This is one sin which I cannot keep at a distance” (90). Nor is it possible to worship Jesus as Lord while acknowledging other gods. And, finally, faith and denial of faith are clearly incompatible.

What is so striking about Thielicke’s discussion, however, is not just the simple fact that he characterizes some acts as *prohibitiva*. What is striking is that he refuses to think of them in terms of his more usual understanding of the *simul justus et peccator* formula. As I noted earlier, Lutheran theologians—including, certainly, Thielicke—have often taken this to mean that the Christian is wholly and entirely saint, and (simultaneously) wholly and entirely sinner. Why not, then, say of one who engages in fornication as a settled way of life that, while in himself he is surely sinner, looked at through Christ in whom he trusts, he is wholly and entirely righteous in God’s eyes?

Thielicke rejects any such possibility, but what is especially striking—at least to me—is not only *that* but *how* he rejects it. With respect to each of these three *prohibitiva* Thielicke rejects any possibility of such an approach. Of the idolatrous bondage of fornication as a settled way of life he says: “Accordingly there is in this situation no *simul*” (89). Of eating at the table of demons, he writes: “II Corinthians 6:14–16 represents another instance where the *simul* is excluded” (91). And of denial of the Lord, he says simply: “Faith and the denial of faith are incompatible. No *simul* can embrace them both” (92). Thus, while Thielicke finds in the New Testament no specific disposition *for* faith, he does find “a specific disposition *against* faith, a disposition with which the new man, the new creation can in no case coexist” (92–93).

Perhaps this does not sound striking to Roman Catholic ears accustomed to the language of *Veritatis Splendor*, but it is striking to ears taught by the (latent antinomianism) of late-twentieth-century American Lutheranism. I first read volume 1 of Thielicke’s *Theological Ethics* as a Lutheran seminary student, probably in 1969 or 1970. Looking back at

my marked-up copy as I worked on this article, I took note of my youthful marginalia. Some of them, unsurprisingly, I would like to retract (and some I cannot even make sense of). But when Thielicke writes of the first of these three examples of *prohibitiva* that “accordingly there is in this situation no *simul*,” my marginal scrawling is very clear, and it testifies to my sense that this was not the approach to Lutheranism I had been learning. That marginal comment consists of just one word: “Wow!” Whatever the differences in cadence and emphasis, here Thielicke is within shouting distance of the teaching of *Veritatis Splendor* (which also is based on St. Paul’s writings) that there are “certain specific kinds of behavior the willful acceptance of which prevents believers from sharing in the inheritance promised to them” (§49). Human freedom, *Veritatis Splendor* emphasizes, is not “self-designing.” On the contrary, it “entails a particular spiritual and bodily structure” (§48). With his own emphases and in his own thought forms, Thielicke would, I think, agree.

Much later in his *Ethics*, Thielicke returns to discuss his understanding of a casuistical minimum, of “limits which cannot be transgressed” (643). Still reluctant to develop a casuistry of moral action, he nonetheless contends that even in the darkness of what he calls the borderline situation, we remain able to make moral distinctions. Even then, he writes, “I shall never reach the state of indifference which allows me to say that in the blackness of this world’s night, in the darkness of the borderline situation, all cats are gray” (607). In the language of *Veritatis Splendor*, we might say that even there the splendor of moral truth may be discerned, “according to which the love of God entails the obligation to respect his commandments, even in the most dire of circumstances” (§91).

What we encounter in such moments is not just a moral command; we encounter God himself. Thielicke gives two examples of such “confrontations with transcendence,” in which, even in the borderline conflict situation, there are not several possible actions in equipoise (643). “First, there is no such thing as an authentic case of conflict in which I am set before the possibility of denying Christ or blaspheming God” (644). We might, of course, imagine extreme circumstances such as those depicted in *Silence*, Shusaku Endo’s story of Portuguese priests in sixteenth-century Japan, who are forced to contemplate trampling on the face of Christ in order to stop the torture of others. And Thielicke himself, as a mid-twentieth-century German, was hardly unaware of such possibilities. Even then—even in such a confrontation with transcendence—we must, he asserts, remember who we are. For “I totally misunderstand my role in the kingdom of God if I think that the continuance of the kingdom depends on my continuing to live and to speak” (644).

Still more, if we allow ourselves to be forced into apostasy, we withhold from our persecutor the possibility of true self-knowledge. For we permit him to suppose that the Lord whom we worship is “an ‘imaginary lord,’ whom I can give up ‘if need be’” (644). According to *Veritatis Splendor*, martyrdom is “the high point of the witness to moral truth” (§93). Thielicke sees clearly that there could never be a need for martyrdom were there not such confrontations with transcendence that leave no place for alternative possibilities for action.

Thielicke’s second example of such a confrontation with transcendence is reminiscent of *Veritatis Splendor*’s invocation of the claims upon us of respect for human dignity. There can be no conflict situation, no choosing among alternatives in equipoise, when what is at stake is “the personhood of my neighbor,” who is made in the image of God and is therefore “the direct representation of transcendence” (645). Here Thielicke has in mind, in particular, torture, which seeks entirely to bypass the humanity of the person tortured. Something more than temptation or coercion is involved here. We may use force or temptation to produce acquiescence, and in that way try to work our will and achieve our goals. Doing so, whether rightly or wrongly, does not fail to recognize the personhood of the one we seek to tempt or coerce. But torture is different. It does not attempt to coax or force a decision out of another; instead it “simply bypasses the sphere of decision altogether by making it impossible” (646). It aims at the personhood of one who is “a representation of transcendence” (646). As such, it is forbidden. “For the Christian owes to the world the public confession that he is one who is committed, ‘bound,’ and hence not ‘capable of anything’” (646).

Although once again the cadence and thought forms are somewhat different, in this concept of a casuistical minimum there is a considerable convergence between Thielicke’s *Ethics* and *Veritatis Splendor*. Push hard enough on the demands of the Christian life, we might say, and we will learn that the “person” cannot float entirely free of the “work,” which both expresses and determines the character of the person.

There is, though, one way in which *Veritatis Splendor* might profit from adopting a little of Thielicke’s cadence. *Veritatis Splendor* exudes a kind of serene confidence about the Christian life that may sometimes be difficult to reconcile with the experience of individual Christians. “Temptations can be overcome, sins can be avoided, because together with the commandments, the Lord gives us the possibility of keeping them. . . . Keeping God’s law in particular situations can be difficult, extremely difficult, but it is never impossible” (§102). Surely this is true. We would not want to say of baptized Christians that the power of Christ’s Holy

Spirit could not make obedience possible in any circumstance. “And if redeemed man still sins,” *Veritatis Splendor* continues, “this is not due to an imperfection of Christ’s redemptive act, but to man’s will not to avail himself of the grace which flows from that act” (§103).

What we miss here, though, is some sense of our weakness, of the differences in strength and circumstances that mark individual Christian lives. In the famous refrain of Book 10 of his *Confessions*—give what you command, and command what you will—St. Augustine also expresses confidence in the power of the Spirit to enable virtuous action. But in his repetition of that formula we sense something that is also present in Thielicke’s thought—the precariousness of our lives as Christians, the deep divisions that sometimes continue to mark the psyches of believers, our sense on occasion that the best we can do does not measure up to what we ought to do, our sense (so strong for Augustine) that God knows our character better than we know ourselves.

At the level of what Thielicke affirms about the Christian life, there is some welcome convergence with the teaching of *Veritatis Splendor*. Christians are not simply caught in a never-ending movement back and forth between the simultaneous verdicts of “saint” and “sinner.” On the contrary, Thielicke knows a third perspective from which to picture the Christian’s existence. In himself a Christian is *peccator*. In Christ that same Christian is *justus*. But there remains that third perspective. Knowing ourselves as believing sinners who are in fellowship with God, we may turn and look back from that angle at ourselves. “This third perspective thus places me at what for me is not the end, but the beginning, the point from which I have to advance” (128). It places us, we might say, beside the rich young man as he is described in *Veritatis Splendor*: on “a path involving a moral and spiritual journey towards perfection” (§15). But it places us there with a keen sense that the Christian who embarks on such a journey also lives in the tension between the two aeons St. Paul so vividly depicts—and that, therefore, theological ethics must “follow the way which leads into and through the tension” (47). A little more of that cadence within *Veritatis Splendor* would help the cause of convergence.