CHRIST
and the
MEANING OF LIFE

A Book of Sermons and Meditations

HELMUT THIELICKE

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Translator's Note

Those who are familiar with the literature of preaching know the series of sermon volumes published over a period of years by a Scottish publisher under the title "The Scholar as Preacher." These volumes of sermons by such preachers as W. M. Macgregor, Theodor Zahn, A. E. Garvie, A. J. Gossip, James Moffat, and James S. Stewart still command the respect and warm appreciation of preachers who continue to wrestle with the task of proclaiming the Word in the words of our day.

I mention this because the phrase "scholar as preacher" leaps into my mind whenever I attempt to characterize the preaching of Helmut Thielicke. This combination of deep scholarly, Biblical, and theological mastery with strong, vividly colorful, pictorial utterance, eschewing the worn cliché and employing the stirring verb and the fascinating picture, the kind of speech that goes straight to the hearer's "personal center," no matter whether he be the "intellectual" or the so-called "common man"—this, both preachers and listeners agree, is what preaching must always strive to be. And the comments of professors of homiletics and preachers of all denominations, in reviews and in scores of letters

which have come to me from all over the country, bear out this judgment. Again and again the comment occurs: "This is great preaching!"

The following sermons and addresses, most of them presented over the radio and television, reflect in their varying length the time limits imposed by the circumstances of their delivery. They have been edited and arranged from manuscript materials put at the disposal of the translator by the author. Included are three sermons on parables which, for reasons beyond our control, were omitted from *The Waiting Father*, the volume of sermons on the parables of Jesus. It may be noted that the sequence of the sermons and meditations follows the general order of the church year. The following classification of chapters may be found helpful: Advent: 1, Christmas: 2-4, New Year: 5-6, Lent: 7-8, Easter: 9-10, Pentecost: 11, Trinitytide: 12-28. The collection has the distinction of being published in English before appearing in print in the author's native country.

I wish to express here my appreciation to Dr. Thielicke for the confidence he has been willing to repose in me in the task of editing and translating these materials.

JOHN W. DOBERSTEIN

Mount Airy, Philadelphia
October, 1961

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Is Technology Diabolical?

Technology is by no means a mere continuation of the development of the old "familiar" craftsmanship. A look at a modern assembly line, let alone modern methods of automation, reveals to us a totally different and unfamiliar world, which at essential points is discontinuous with earlier periods of history. Manual workers' tools are amenable to human hands and we have a relation of immediacy to what is fashioned in this way. In technology, however, through the interposition of natural forces such as steam, electricity, and atomic power, there has arisen a qualitatively *new* world of production which no longer lies in the hands of men, but within which man is becoming more and more a functionary.

What we have called the interposition of natural forces brings with it a relationship of mediacy to that which is produced with the aid of natural forces. And it is precisely this intermediate area which then begins to generate its *own* processes. It begins, as it were, to make history and to outrun the men who thought they were making technological history. Man's immediacy and freedom of action diminishes, as it were, to the one instant in

which he exercises the initiative in starting these processes and in the next instant these processes themselves become autonomous and lead us where we do not wish to go.

It was doubtless this observation that compelled the invention of that somewhat "mythical" phrase "the revolt of the means" and thus assigned to these intermediate forces a dignity that made them bearers of leading roles in the drama of history. For to at least the same degree that man occupies himself with technological progress and the refinement of technical methods of fabrication, he is also beginning to reflect upon how he can *assert himself* against this technology which he has conjured up and which is now assuming the role of a fellow protagonist or even an antagonist. It was in line with this that Nicholas Berdyaev once said that in our technological world utopias seem to us to be far more realizable than was formerly believed to be possible. But now we are confronted with the altogether different question of how we can escape its ultimate realization. We are beginning to strive for a non-utopian, a less perfect world. Thus one might say that we are trying to leap from a train which is carrying us down the steep track of this intermediate area to an unwanted, oppressive (!) perfection.

In this connection we must not confine our thinking only to atomic power and technology which is determined by the *physical* sciences; we must also think of the technology which is determined by the *biological* sciences. Once we pursue the idea that all things can be "made," including man himself, it turns out, paradoxically, that man is the one who ends up being "made." This secular, physical realm reluctantly but unmistakably opens up metaphysical vistas.

But we do not have to go to the borderline situations to find illustrative cases. Plain everyday life confronts us with the same problems. To mention one example, we not only "use" the telephone, but we are also afraid of it, because it uses us, because it interrupts the organic course of our work or our rest, and because in angry moments we are therefore inclined to class it with the appointment book and the internal revenue office in

the triumvirate of a modern dictatorship. So, who dictates to whom? Is it the bell or the receiver that dictates to me or is it I who dictate into the microphone? Thus technology becomes an intrusion into our life of something alien that lays its spell upon us and as a manifestation of a new omnipotent force can take on an almost religious significance. In a strange imitation of the real thing these phenomena seem to emanate veneration, fascination, and fear. In the history of thought this alien character of technology can be best illustrated by reference to the Hegelian-Marxist concept of the transformation of quantity into quality: technology is not merely the quantitative summation of scientific knowledge and mechanical skills, but rather, as this summation emerges, something essentially new comes into being, namely, the totally different thing which is technology itself.

It is the biologists especially who have called our attention to this highly remarkable fact that technology has come upon us as a kind of alien invasion, a fact which perhaps has been least noticed by the technologists themselves. Konrad Lorenz, for example, in his profound books about animals, has pointed out that in earlier periods of man's history the great climatic and geological changes in environment took place very slowly and that therefore man had correspondingly long periods in which to adjust himself to the changed environmental conditions. Now technology is likewise producing sudden changes in our environmental conditions. And they are plain to be seen. These changes produced by technology differ, however, from the processes induced by geological and climatic changes in that they have come upon us *suddenly*. They have occurred within a few decades, and the picture of our grandfathers suddenly returning from the grave and trying to cross one of our main streets would be an illustration of the speed of this development. Innumerable problems in our modern technicized culture, all the way from traffic conditions to statesmanship, are certainly to be traced back essentially to the fact that we have not acclimated ourselves to these radically changed conditions and that we are moving

about incautiously, shiveringly, and often terrifiedly in this new atomic world.

It is obvious that man's creative capacity always (and particularly in the area of technics) consists not only in the power of construction but also of destruction, a fact which Goethe expressed symbolically by having Mephistopheles accompany the creative Faust, indicating that a demonic power is inherent in all Faustian-human work. The power of destruction comes into play wherever man desires to be a Titan, wherever he proposes to be autonomously self-creative and to throw off the ultimate sanctions. The Bible provides for this a parable in the story of the tower of Babel. The tower that was erected in Babylon was actually a tremendous creative accomplishment of the ancient world and it had certain technological features. But this tower found its place in history and thus gained an abiding symbolical value, not because it was the prototype of creative, technological achievement but rather because this achievement also had within it a very special and secret purpose grounded in the nature of humanity itself. For these men determined to perform this gigantic technological feat because they had deposed God and with Promethean defiance were bent upon building a tower which would soar into the realms of the heavens from which they supposed they had banished him.

They wished to erect an architectural symbol of their own super-humanity. When man falls into megalomania and hubris, this frequently expresses itself in a kind of architectural gigantism. But then something extremely significant appeared: contrary to all the plans, the tower was incapable of constituting a center that would gather and bind men together. Quite to the contrary, the fate of dispersion and confusion of tongues swept down upon them. But was this really "fate," was not this confusion and dispersion the result of an offense, a sin?

The people who have deposed God and determined upon their own super-humanity can no longer trust each other. They know that now each one of them is subject only to the dictatorship of his own will to power and no longer bound to an ultimate

authority. That makes him unpredictable and therefore one is bound to be afraid of him. The fear that destroys trust in Babylon and permits the terror of the unpredictable to triumph does not unite men; it rather drives them apart. Fear always has a centrifugal tendency. When man himself has become unpredictable and sinister, the technological enhancement of his power only makes him more sinister. If one cannot trust the normal man, then much less can one trust the man who has enhanced his greatness and power by means of technology. Once man has become an unpredictable and sinister being, then the moment he acquires a bow and arrow he is even more to be feared, and he reaches the pinnacle of sinisterness when he is equipped with atomic power.

Thus as the tower of Babel is a monument of man's greatness, it is at the same time a symbol of his sinisterness. The same is true of technology. In technology the qualities of its producer emerge with gigantic clarity. May not this explain the strange fact that, even though the technology of communication has diminished distances and brought people and nations closer to one another, this has by no means contributed to the growth of the solidarity of mankind? The warm, secure world, which really should result when nations have become neighbors through technological means, obviously has failed to appear.

The conclusion that must be reached here is this: Our technology is all right—simply because it is exact and based upon calculations—but obviously *man* is not all right, because he is incalculable, because he is unpredictable. And he is incalculable and unpredictable because he has thrown off the ultimate authority, or to put it quite plainly, because he has thrown off the commandments of God.

This brings us to the question whether technology is really a menace to man, or whether man, whose arm has been extended by technology, has not rather become a menace to himself, which would mean that the talk about the demonic character of technology is simply foolish, a kind of red herring thrown down to escape moral responsibility. In the last analysis it is not a matter

of how atomic energy can be tamed, but rather of how man can be tamed, or more precisely, how he can be set straight. And for this there is no ready-made prescription; it is a question for every individual. Because man, who is at issue here, is always the same, so the great truths that stand above his life are always the same; they are always as young as the stars of the firmament which have been shining above him since time immemorial. The Book of Christianity will never grow obsolete although the old world is surpassed technologically and even the modern age is thrown into the discard.

Having thus stated at the outset that the problem of technology is exclusively a problem of *man*, we may now say that we have perhaps overshot the mark a bit. That is to say that this may put us in danger of jumping to a hasty conclusion. The conclusion runs something like this: If we see to it that man is set straight, then his technology will be all right too. And this, of course, is very often said in Christian sermons and exhortations. I, however, consider this attempt to attribute all the technological troubles of the atomic age *only* to human sin and to get at them *only* by appeals to the inner man to be an oversimplification. And to make clear the danger involved in this oversimplification I would merely remind you of what we said above concerning the "revolt of the means" and the autonomous elements in the technological process. It follows from these observations that man is by no means merely an autonomous subject who produces technological processes, but that he is at the same time drawn into a relationship of dependence upon them and becomes an object of these processes.

This is precisely what gives rise to that dramatic and exceedingly disturbing question of where in the midst of all these inexorable processes one's own decision of conscience has any chance at all. He who does not ask this question and is not determined to wrestle with it never even approaches the real mysteries of our age. At most he can be only a fellow traveler, not a shaper of this age. And even his activity would be basically no more than laissez-faire.

The crux of this whole question lies in the concept of what we have called *autonomy*. Is there really such a thing as the autonomy of technological development, of economics, of politics? And if it really exists, how can there be any real chance for responsible action, meaning free action inspired by conscience? Arnold Gehlen once said with a certain right that the scientist, as well as the technologist, appears to have been disfranchised in so far as he has no control over the work of research and application which he carries on. Strictly speaking, he is not the researcher who pushes forward his research; it is rather the research that pushes itself forward. And, what is more, it moves in accordance with a chain reaction which operates in an automatic process that proceeds from particular questions to particular answers and from there to a new set of questions. For the researcher neither "sets" the problems nor "decides" to apply technologically what he has learned. What becomes the problem follows by an inevitable necessity from what is already known, and it is of the logic of experiment that exact knowledge already includes control of the (technological) effect. The "decision" to apply the knowledge is unnecessary; or perhaps one might say that it is taken away from him. Oppenheimer, one of the builders of the atom bomb, once went beyond this and also described this logical inexorability as an irresistible psychical gradient when he said with regard to his own particular task that what is technologically "sweet" turns out to be irresistible even when it is the computation and construction of the atom bomb.

The *first* form in which the autonomy of technology operates is therefore the combination of question and answer, of theoretical knowledge and technological effect. One necessarily follows the other. The researcher appears to be only the medium through which this sequence operates. His own intellectual contribution emerges only from the ability (sometimes the ability of genius) to recognize the "waiting" chain reaction of question and answer and to resolve it. But is he really the responsible steersman? Does not the intellectual ship of scientific and technological progress sail on with nobody on the bridge?

The *second* form in which the autonomy of technology operates is expressed in the process which we may characterize by the words "stress" and "counterstress." This process can be traced in politics and economics as well as technology. We mention a few examples:

When some important technological advance, let us say automation, is introduced into one sector of an industry, then the companies in the same business must "follow suit" in order to meet competition. Here we have an illustration of the relationship of stress and counterstress that operates with all the inevitability of natural law. Or we may think of the same law as it operates in the realm of armaments. If a potential enemy acquires atomic weapons, I am subjected to the necessity of doing the same thing, or at least producing an equal force, for my own self-defense. If I consider this armament to be madness —and who does not?—then I cannot meet my responsibility for combatting this madness by simply omitting to exert my "counterstress." This, after all, would only stimulate the potential enemy's megalomania. Rather, I can put into practice my responsibility of conscience over against this madness only by considering political measures to bring about controlled disarmament. But then this disarmament is itself subject to the law of stress and counterstress; it is a process the individual phases of which are likewise bound to the law of reciprocity.

If one stops and looks at the history of the world from this point of view, one discovers that this law of stress and counterstress, this *do ut des*, "I give that you may give," this tit for tat, permeates all spheres of life, even the personal relationship between my neighbor and myself. Only he who sees this clearly can appreciate what a radically new thing it was that appeared when the Gospel came. For the Gospel abolishes this law of retaliation and reciprocation and makes way for the I-Thou relationship. It breaks this vicious circle and in the Golden Rule lays upon me the obligation to make a fresh start and take the free, venturesome initiative. But that which here can come like a fresh, creative breeze into my relation to my neighbor and

make all things new is something that can be carried over only in a limited way into the more impersonal spheres of technology, economics, and politics. The endeavor to think through this distinction between these two spheres of life, not simply to separate them and let them fall apart, but rather to distinguish between them—this endeavor constitutes one of the most difficult and challenging chapters of theological ethics in both confessions.