

Eros and Agape in the sexual Ethics of Helmut Thielicke

Robert L. MacLarkey

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맥라키는 Ontario Ancaster의 Redeemer College 사회학 교수이다. Westminster신학교 M.Div., Institute for Christian Studies의 M.Phil, 그리고 Toronto대학에서 사회학 박사학위를 받았다. 맥라키 박사는 결혼과 가정에 관한 사회학의 영역을 가르치며 연구하고 있다.

Abstract

There is much confusion in the church and in society about human sexuality. Fear, anxiety, and perversion are commonplace. Helmut Thielicke, a distinguished German theologian, has provided significant insight in his theological and sexual ethics which can renew and re-direct the prevailing distortions of human sexuality. In this article, we look in depth at Thielicke's sexual ethics, and also present an evaluation of his attempt to formulate a responsible Christian ethic of male-female relationships.

Helmut Thielicke(1908-1986) had a distinguished career in Germany as a Lutheran preacher, author, and professor. He began his professional activity at the University of Heidelberg in 1936. Thielicke was dismissed from his teaching position in Heidelberg in 1940 after repeatedly criticizing the Nazi government. During World War II, he was associated with the resistance movement which sought to assassinate Hitler. After the War, Thielicke was appointed to the chair in theology at the University of Tübingen. He held this position until 1954 when he was chosen to be the first Dean of the Theological Faculty at the University of Hamburg. Six years later, Thielicke was named rector of the University and held this post until his retirement in 1974.

When Helmut Thielicke died in March, 1986, at the age of 77, he left behind him a legacy of popular and academic works. Included in Thielicke's academic publications are a major three volume study entitled Theological Ethics and a three volume systematic theology, The Evangelical Faith. In this article, we will concentrate on Thielicke's Theological Ethics. Very few articles have been written in North America about Thielicke's ethical position even though his writings have been available in English since 1964. By dealing in detail with Thielicke's sexual ethics, we will attempt to convey the depth of his thought - a depth which far surpasses much written in North America on sexual ethics.

Thielicke's three volume work on theological ethics makes a major contribution to those concerned to live as Christians in the 20th century. These three volumes have

been described as "the most extensive study of theological and social ethics ever written on Reformation soil."¹⁾ Thielicke makes wide use of research from various academic disciplines in coming to his conclusions about the contours of responsible Christian living. He has written on the theological foundations of ethics, politics, sociology, economics, law, art, and sex in his three volumes of ethical reflection. This article will concentrate on Thielicke's sexual ethics. Specifically, we will focus on Thielicke's understanding of love in his ethics of sex.

Much misunderstanding and confusion exist in the church and in society about human love and human sexuality. Fear, anxiety, and perversion are more common than a healthy appreciation and practice of love and sexuality. Thielicke has many helpful things to say about humans as sexual beings who live with others and before God. Concentrating on Thielicke's sexual ethics, then, should provide valuable insight and direction for Christians who want to live responsible lives as male and female.

The Sexual and Anthropological Crisis

When Thielicke begins to write on sexual ethics, he immediately points to a crisis. He talks about a crisis in the ethics of sex because of a deeper crisis in anthropology.

1) Helmut Thielicke. *Theological Ethics*, Vol. I, ed. William H. Lazareth(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), p.ix.

Thielicke maintains that the fundamental crisis in the view of man in much of 20th century thought is to see males and females in a functional way. Man's wholeness as a body-person has been ignored, lost, or discounted. Man as male and female, therefore, is treated as a biological "thing" who performs a function; a factor of production; a means to an end. Man's uniqueness and value as a person who lives before God and his or her neighbour are lost. This has tragic consequences in the world of work, education, and government and also in human sexual relationships.

When a human being's biological existence is isolated and severed from full personhood, he or she becomes and can be treated as a sexual functionary - one who performs a biological act. This tragic reduction of sexuality to a biological function radically calls into question the Biblical mandate of one man and one woman becoming one flesh. With such a biological reductionism, we can become "one flesh" with any number of partners. In principle, then, there would exist a complete interchangeability of marriage partners. With the increasing divorce rate in many 20th century societies, we realize that not only in principle but also in practice individuals are acting out this interchangeability. What has been called serial polygamy is becoming more the norm than the exception in today's marriages.

The problem behind the problem, then, seems to be our lack of awareness and understanding of the wholeness of a human being as a body-person. A person's uniqueness is

located in his or her personhood. When personhood is ignored or reduced to the biological, then any sex partner will do, i.e., will be functional. Here we are touching on the root crisis in anthropology and specifically in human sexual relationships.²⁾

Eros and Agape Defined

What should be the Christian community's response to this drift into sexual chaos? A detailed analysis of Helmut Thielicke's sexual ethics will provide some helpful direction. Thielicke begins his ethics of sex by defining the concept of love using the Greek terms eros and agape. He discusses eros by using Plato's eros myth in Phaedrus and Symposium. Thielicke points out that Plato talks about two types of eros. The first type is a blind, passion-driven force which concentrates on the beautiful body of another person. The second type is an eros guided by reason. Eros led by reason does not mean that eros has lost its ecstatic, erotic character. But it does allow eros to concentrate on more than the other's body. This eros recognizes the symbolic dimension of a person's beauty which transcends that particular person. It directs our eyes to the "idea of beauty" in another person. The lower level of eros only allows participation in the impulse and desire and desire dimension of another individual. Eros guided by reason wants to relate to the whole person.

2) Thielicke, Vol.III, p.20-26.

Reasoned eros, then, allows us to get beyond hormones and feelings of passion to the person as person. Furthermore, eros led by reason can finally take a person to the point where he or she grasps beauty in itself and experiences an "ecstatic vision." At this point all the ephemeral qualities of beauty have dropped away. We now encounter beauty in its timeless fullness.³⁾

Plato, according to Thielicke, also writes about the aspect of eros that seeks completion. The striving for the final vision of "the beautiful" indicates an erotic defect in human nature that desires fulfilment. This striving after completion is seen as a need for self-fulfilment. Eros, then, has an egocentric tendency in which a person completes himself or herself as he or she strives toward a vision of the beautiful. Self-fulfilment is realized in the midst of this process.⁴⁾

Thielicke now turns away from Greek thought. He observes that when dealing with the New Testament view of love we are not talking about abstract notions of beauty which have independent existence in a world of ideas. God's love for us is a nevertheless kind of love. God in Christ does not love us because we are worthy but because of his free decision to love. God loves us as people in his image who can live in relationship with him. God's agape brings out in individuals their creational potential. It liberates us to come into our own. Therefore, in our agape-love for the other, we

3) Thielicke, Vol.III, pp.28,29

4) Ibid., pp.29, 30.

do not love because the person is worthy of our love but despite his or her worthiness. It is this unconditional kind of love that frees another to be the kind of person he or she was created to be. In agape, we see the other person, even our enemy, as a child of God full of creation-dignity. Therefore our love does not depend on the person's importance to me but on his or her importance to God - a person created and called to live in fellowship with the Creator.⁵⁾

Furthermore, Thielicke maintains that agape is not at our disposal. It is not inherent in our nature. Agape is God-given. It must be received and then passed on. "He who does not receive it cannot pass it on, and he who does not pass it on loses what he has received."⁶⁾ Thielicke adds to this idea that agape has a very different motive than eros. In eros the worth of the other person is the object. In agape the "authentic being" of the other person is in the forefront.⁷⁾

The Interpenetration of Eros and Agape

When eros and agape are defined, we could easily conclude that they have little, if anything, to do with each other. One is receiving, the other is giving; one is self-fulfilling, the other is self-giving. Thielicke faults Anders Nygren's classic work on Eros and Agape with failing to

5) Ibid., pp.31, 32.

6) Ibid., p.33.

7) Ibid., p.28.

show how these two dimensions of love interconnect. He charges that Nygren has thoroughly defined two ideal-types but makes no effort to demonstrate how they relate to each other. Specifically, Thielicke wants to show how eros and agape intersect in sexual relationships. He writes that the sex relationship or "community" always occurs between two people who are much more than biological organisms. They are persons. In sexual encounters two human beings have a personal relationship, therefore, agape can not be excluded. A person's "real being can never be a mere means to an end for me a mere instrument of sexual ecstasy."⁸⁾ The other person is a neighbour not a prostitute. Agape must be present in which we seek the other's welfare and respect him/her as God's image bearer. Agape is integral to a genuine sexual relationship.⁹⁾

On the other hand, not any neighbour will do. The character of a marriage and sexual relationship calls for selection; selection based on physical, emotional, intellectual, and social affinity. This process of selection "a neighbour" brings eros into the picture in a central way:

"Not everyone who is my neighbour and therefore stands in agape relationship to me can be the object of my eros. I cannot, for example, give myself erotically or even marry out of sympathy. Anyone who attempts this enters, not into

8) Ibid., p.33.

9) Ibid., pp.31-33.

marriage, but definitely into something alongside of marriage."10)

Eros and agape, therefore, inter-penetrate each other. They are very much tied up together in human relationships. In the sexual relationship this interconnection takes no an even higher degree of intensity and immediacy.¹¹⁾

When we focus on eros, we realize that within human sexuality there is a central driving force which Thielicke calls the libido. He defines this sex impulse as "the desire, accompanied by pleasure and the urge to consummate this pleasure in ecstasy, for psychophysical union with another human being."¹²⁾ Characteristic of the pleasure and ecstasy involved in the sex impulse is its transitory, temporary nature. "For pleasure and ecstasy are excitements that rise and fall in definite and steep curves."¹³⁾ There is no prolonging the orgasmic climax of sexual union. The short-lived nature of libido's sexual ecstasy is qualitatively different from the life-long character of a relationship shaped by agape. This does not mean that libido is necessarily sinful. But it must find its place within the agape-fellowship of husband and wife. Only then does libido have the stability and permanence that it needs.¹⁴⁾

10) Ibid., p.34.

11) Ibid., pp.33, 34.

12) Ibid., p.35.

13) Ibid.

14) Ibid., pp.35-44.

In an attempt, however, to integrate the sex impulse with the total personal relationship, Thielicke warns us that we should not think of libido as solely self-seeking and egoistic. Then, libido becomes a threatening force that we must keep in check and domesticate with higher personal virtues. This approach would give us a view of man where the mental and moral ride herd on the sensual and instinctive. Thielicke rejects this dualistic notion of man. He insists that man is a "psychophysical unity" and that the sex impulse has a creational place within man's totality. At this point a critical question emerges:

"Now, if we keep in view this unity of man (it is unity of body and soul before God), then this means that we must ask to what extent the libido itself (and not merely that 'higher self' which really does not exist at all) moves toward real communication, toward serving the other person, and hence to what extent it seeks much more than mere self-satisfaction."¹⁵⁾

In sexual intercourse one is looking for and needs response from the other to find any real pleasure and fulfilment for one's self. Some degree of two-way participation is required if either partner is to be sexually satisfied. Without this inter-involvement, sexual intercourse "degenerates into a kind of disguised masturbation and

15) Ibid., p.46.

accordingly remains unfulfilled.”¹⁶⁾ This need for co-operation and mutual service is further demanded by the difference in sexual make-up of male and female. The man is ready for orgasm relatively quickly; the female moves toward climax only after prolonged preparation. When a man rushes into orgasm to release the built-up sexual impulse, he finds that the woman is often left far behind, unable to respond and participate. This out-of-phase situation in turn leaves the man feeling less than satisfied. The sex impulse itself, then, has a built-in demand to seek the other’s fulfilment and not just one’s own satisfaction:

“The human libido cannot desire only itself when it desires itself; it must take the other person into account. It must affirm the other person and it cannot only desire him. The libido must have in it a ‘diaconic’ element, an element of serving love, if it is not to be left by itself and cheated of its own goal.”¹⁷⁾

Once we have recognized the service aspect to the sex impulse, we are opened up to realize that this reality is a sign of what the total sexual relationship is to be. Concern for the other emerges as total concern for the total welfare of a person, including his or her sexual happiness. So agape makes its presence felt even at the elemental level of our

16) Ibid.

17) Ibid., p.48.

sexual impulse:

“Agape takes hold of a tendency which is built into the creaturely sex nature of man in the form of a sign, a challenge, and transforms it into a motive. It gives meaning and purpose to what instinct may do ignorantly and relates it to the whole of human existence and community for which man was created. In this way the sex community which is determined by agape also has its effect upon the physical elements of the relationship.”¹⁸⁾

The effect of agape on sexual relations is illustrated clearly in counselling situations where there are problems in sexual intercourse. Often it is discovered that the problem is not poor technique but poor communication. Sexual relations do not blossom where there is no communication of self-giving love. Agape is the required foundation and atmosphere in which sexual intercourse becomes a joy rather than a function and a chore. Agape transforms eros in human sexuality into an experience of joyful self-giving and self-giving joy.¹⁹⁾

Thielicke adds, however, that the penetration of eros by agape in human sexuality does not mean that eros is less than fully human and, therefore, needs elevation by agape. Human sexuality is clearly distinguishable from the sex

18) Ibid., p.49.

19) Ibid., pp.50, 51.

impulse in animals. Animals are bound by instinct governed by hormone cycles. This creates an automatic character to animal copulation. There is no decision involved. In contrast to the animals, man has the task and the freedom to decide what he will do with his sex impulse. Decision implies risk, meaning, values. In other words, man's sex impulse is distinctly human. Human sexuality is personal and responsible, not functional and animalistic.²⁰⁾

Further confirmation of the humanness in man's sexuality is the fact that eros does not require the specifically sexual relationship to be preserved and to grow. There are many examples of the energy in eros being sublimated and transformed into another form of human activity. The poet, artist, and priest can experience the power of eros in creative activity and service. A man and woman can have an erotic relationship which does not need to end in sexual intercourse.²¹⁾

The Actualization of Eros and Agape

The sexual nature of man, then, is fully human. It should also be actualized. In sexual reactions there is a sense in which a person "comes into his own." As new aspects of his personhood emerge through sexual love, a male or female becomes more fully the person God has created him or her to

20) Ibid., pp.52-56.

21) Ibid., pp.56, 57.

be. Thielicke believes this is even more true for the woman than for the man. A woman's "essential image" comes out in sexual intercourse. To be woman is to be "lover, companion, and mother."²²⁾ Even unmarried women find their vocational fulfilment in some sublimated and transformed way in which wifehood and motherhood are central. "The wife gives her 'self' when she gives herself sexually. She holds nothing back and precisely in doing this she comes to her self-realization."²³⁾ The man is not so totally defined by sexual relationships with his wife. He finds deep self-realisation also in his vocation outside the home. Man is not "so deeply stamped and moulded by sexual experience as is the case with the woman."²⁴⁾

Thielicke anticipates the protests which this idea will generate, so he attempts to support his views with some observations. He is quick to point out that these situations are not normative or necessarily just, but they do or may point to an underlying distinction between male and female sexuality. Thielicke observes, for instance, that we talk about the seduction of a girl in a much more serious way than the seduction of a man. "To seduce a girl means to bring her to self-abandonment."²⁵⁾ This deep giving of the self is not in view when a man is seduced. Secondly, the double standard of morality may reflect a difference in male, female sexuality.

22) *ibid.*, p.81.

23) *Ibid.*

24) *Ibid.*

25) *Ibid.*, p.82.

Even though the male may have numerous sexual experiences before marriage, he wants his future wife to be a virgin. Historical and cultural reasons notwithstanding, Thielicke suggests part of the explanation for this widespread feeling is rooted in the physiological structure of the sex organs themselves:

"Whereas the woman receives something into herself, the male sex organ is directed outward, away from himself; it discharges. The receiving of something is contrasted with being relieved of something. From a purely physiological point of view, the woman receives something from the sexual encounter (and the medical men point out that this is important even though conception does not take place), whereas the man discharges and thus rids himself of something. The extraordinary force of the symbolism of this disparate physical structure can hardly be evaded.²⁶⁾"

Thirdly, in female sexuality there is an "innate tendency toward monogamy."²⁷⁾ This is not true for the male. The woman is marked, stamped, possessed by the first man with whom she has sexual intercourse. The connection between the physical and personal is so strong in female sexuality that everything in her being desires to belong to the first man who has penetrated her both physically and emotionally.

26) Ibid., p.83.

27) Ibid., p.85.

Sexual problems like frigidity in women have often been traced back to unhappy and broken experiences in a woman's first sexual act. There is little suggestion that the male is so profoundly marked by sexual relationships. "It doesn't seem to touch him at the core of his personality."²⁸⁾ In this sense man's sexual nature has a polygamous rather than a monogamous tendency.

Thielicke presents these ideas as "phenomenological observations" that may be pointing to a genuine ontological difference between the male and female sex nature. In fact, Thielicke does not hesitate to talk about, for instance, the metaphysical background of man's polygamous nature. He sees in man a "life urge to exploit the stimulative value of every kind of change."²⁹⁾ This would include sex partners. Thielicke is quick to point out, however, that this trend towards polygamy in male sexuality is viewing man in isolation:

"For the fact is that the man 'exists' as such only because there is such a thing as 'woman': that is to say, he simply cannot leave out of consideration her existence and therefore her sex nature. And since the woman cannot live polygamously without damage to the very substance of her nature, the man cannot do so either."³⁰⁾

28) Ibid.

29) *ibid.*, p.86.

30) *Ibid.*, p.89.

Manhood or masculinity, therefore, is a relational term and loses its meaning and substance isolated and abstracted from feminine existence. When the total male-female relationship is held in view, then, polygamy is "not in conformity with the masculine nature, but rather a denial of it."³¹⁾

Besides this anthropological understanding of male sexuality, Thielicke also shows how the penetration of eros by agape leads a male to monogamy despite his life urge. Agape means we live for the other and accept the other - her sex nature included. "If for the woman not to be the sole wife of her husband means to wound her, then agape demands that this wound must not be inflicted upon her."³²⁾ We are to respect and honour the uniqueness of our sex partner. Therefore, we channel our sexual drives in a way that will build a relationship not threaten it. The one flesh character of marriage calls for monogamy in which trusting love can flourish.

Eros and the Creation-Redemption Order

Thielicke believes that marriage is an order of creation. When Thielicke refers to marriage as an order of creation, he means that the man-woman relationship was a "constituent part of the things that were created."³³⁾ In contrast to societal

31) Ibid., p.90.

32) *ibid.*, p.92.

structures like the state, which Thielicke calls an order of history, marriage was established before the Fall and is therefore a “real” order of creation. This idea provides the theological foundation for seeing marriage as a positive fulfilment of life rather than a necessary evil. Individual eros finds its place within the creation order. The creation account of man as male and female called to be one flesh allows for a positive, integrated understanding of the creational goodness of man as body and as sexual.³⁴⁾

Thielicke also sees the order of redemption as providing legitimization of his sexual ethics. He does not think the idea of creation-order is sufficient, in itself, to do this. The effects of the Fall are too deep and real to simply recapture a pre-Fall state of marriage and sex. The creationally given eros, distorted by the Fall, shows up in our society as almost a duty of fullest possible sexual self-realization. Individual eros and its fulfilment, therefore, tends to dominate husband-wife relationships. This creates tremendous instability in a marriage as witnessed by our ever increasing divorce rate.

Thielicke maintains that eros was given by God to grow and develop. But the development of eros is tied into the development of the whole person. With growth in personhood comes growth in individuality. Here lies the blessing but also the challenge and possible threat to marriage. In marriage,

33) Ibid., p.104.

34) Ibid., pp.304-316.

two people with highly developed and differentiated personalities, including the eros dimension, need to work at complementation, integration, and accommodation. This is an on-going task. It appears, however, that many couples are not prepared or willing to make the effort. So the creational intent of development in individuality is full of rich diversity, but also contains a potentially destructive force in a marriage relationship.³⁵⁾

Growth in individuality in a marriage, therefore, must be honoured and nurtured. But at the same time this process must be led by redemptive love. It is agape that allows for self-giving and accommodation. Agape allows us to replace the question of "What do I get out of this?" with "Where and when must I serve?" In a marriage this is an indispensable question and attitude if, not only the growth of the two individuals, but also the wealth of the total relationship is to be realized. Agape, redemptive love, must lead and permeate the growth of the created but fallen structure of human sexuality. In this way, individual eros will come into its own, but not at the expense of growth in the marriage relationship itself.³⁶⁾

EVALUATION AND CRITIQUE

Evaluating and criticizing a theologian of Helmut

35) Ibid., pp.306, 307.

36) Ibid., pp.310-314.

Thielicke's stature is a difficult and somewhat intimidating task. It would be easy to isolate a point here and there and fabricate an extended critique. Thielicke's breadth and depth as a thinker and writer must be honoured and respected. I do have some reservations, however, about Thielicke's approach in his ethics of sex. I will concentrate on points that I believe to be central to his thought. This critique, however, must be seen in the context of genuine appreciation for much that Thielicke has written.

Creation Order, Sin, and Eschatology

Thielicke self-consciously bases his sexual ethics on the order of creation. But this foundation in Thielicke's approach needs to be more solid. He calls marriage an order of creation, but is quick to add a number of qualifications which call the creational givenness of marriage and human sexuality into question.³⁷⁾ To understand why Thielicke takes this approach, we must understand that his sexual ethics is part of his theological ethics. Thielicke makes this point repeatedly. In his theological ethics, we find the reason why Thielicke has difficulty with a full appreciation of marriage and sexuality being rooted in the creation order.

The question of creation and creation order is not a peripheral question for Thielicke. He explains that positive intention behind his entire ethical writings is to "give a

37) Ibid., pp.304-316.

Christian interpretation of human and historical reality in general, and to do this in a comprehensive and systematic way."³⁸) The orders of creation are a central focus of this interpretation of reality. But already in the Preface to Vol.I of his ethics, Thielicke makes clear that he does not feel at ease with creation orders as structures of reality. He feels that in the last analysis the world with its orders is essentially an "objectification of my own Babylonian heart."³⁹) Sin has permeated creation so thoroughly that the orders themselves are radically distorted:

"This statement has momentous consequences for theology's doctrine of the orders, which accordingly can no longer be conceived as a doctrine of the orders of creation, much less in terms of natural law."⁴⁰)

Thielicke is intensely afraid of minimizing the effects of sin and thus undermining the need for Christ's death. He is also afraid of introducing any scholastic idea of natural law into theology and ethics where man with his unaided reason can discover the structure of reality and truth. This idea also would undercut the necessity and value of salvation in Christ who is the Way, Life, and Truth.

Thielicke believes that Luther was on the right track

38) Helmut Thielicke. *Theological Ethics*, Vol.I, ed. William H. Lazareth(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), p.xiii.

39) *Ibid.*, p.xxi.

40) *Ibid.*

when he subsumed creation-orders under the doctrine of justification. In fact, the idea of the orders of creation can be seen as a byproduct of Luther's idea of justification. With Luther, Thielicke wants to root the orders of creation in justification. He believes that if we do not do this, it is inevitable that the various spheres of life will be ripped away from Christ's lordship. The process of secularization will take its full course. Thielicke is deeply concerned about positing autonomous spheres of life which are not subject to ethics and religion. He rejects the idea of autonomous spheres with inherent laws. Thielicke mentions that the Nazi government used this notion to insist that the church in Germany stay out of politics.⁴¹⁾

What, then, is Thielicke's view of the orders of creation? He sees his entire ethical approach as rooted in eschatology. The believer stands in the tension of the already and not yet of the kingdom of God:

"Ethics has its place, therefore, precisely in the field of tension between the old and the new aeons, not in the old, nor in the new alone."⁴²⁾

"The theme of ethics is this walking between two worlds."⁴³⁾

"Theological ethics is eschatological or it is nothing."⁴⁴⁾

41) Ibid., pp.6-14.

42) Ibid., p.43.

43) Ibid., p.47.

44) Ibid.

"Ethics is normatively determined by this (Christ's) postponement."⁴⁵⁾

So for Thielicke, ethics is possible and necessary because Christ has yet to come in the end-time. In the meantime, the orders of this world must still be respected.

Yet because of the temporary character of this world, the orders are seen as emergency or interim measures. For Thielicke, the orders are totally embedded in a fallen creation and, therefore, are in the process of passing away. Occasionally Thielicke seems to recognize that the various spheres of reality contain an independent, inherent law which governs the functioning of a particular sphere. But he quickly and consistently qualifies this idea. The orders of creation with their laws are only part of a temporary situation and are finally "strange and alien" to the kingdom of God.⁴⁶⁾

This type of thinking, then, makes itself felt when Thielicke writes about marriage as an order of creation. He does call marriage a "real" order of creation but immediately insists that the "actual form it took was drawn into the Fall."

⁴⁷⁾ Thielicke does not allow room for the possibility that the created structure of marriage and human sexuality might still be intact, even though any individual marriage might be moving in a sinful rather than a God-serving direction.

In Thielicke's thought law is reduced consistently to mean

45) Ibid., p.43.

46) Ibid., pp.373-376; pp.380, 381.

47) Ibid., p.105.

Biblical commandments. His extended discussion on law and gospel in Vol.I(pp.51-146), for example, is revealing. Thielicke struggles with the question of how God's law has a place any longer in the life of a believer who has been saved by grace. In one hundred pages of discussion, nowhere do we find the suggestion that God's law is broader than God's commandments in the Scripture. But this understanding is what Thielicke's theological and sexual ethics need. God's law is broader and more comprehensive than the commandment-law found in the Bible. God's law is a part of God's word which is an all-encompassing reality. God's Word is the connecting link between God and his creation. It includes the written Word, the Bible, and Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate; and also, the creation reveals God's Word. God's written Word makes it clear that there is a Word for man in the creation. (cf. Psalms 33:6-9; 147:17-19; 148:8, 2 Peter 3:5-7; Hebrews 11:3) God's creation-Word structures, upholds, and directs the whole cosmos including man, animals, plants, and matter. God has built laws into the creation that direct the total functioning of his creation. Man's task is to walk in those creationally good ways of God.⁴⁸⁾

This view of creation-Word, creation-law, creation-order does not ignore the reality of the Fall. Man did rebel against God. Man did begin to serve the creation and himself rather

48) Bernard Zylstra. "Thy Word Our Life," in Will All the Kings Men, ed. Robert Carvill(Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1972), pp.153-218.

than the Creator. But the reality of sin does not necessarily mean that God's creation-Word has been obliterated as Thielicke seems to believe. In fact the Scripture makes it clear that God's reign over his creation endures forever.(Ps. 145:13; Isa. 40:8) Man's sin does not eliminate God's creating, structuring, maintaining Word. God's Word continues to call man and the entire creation to love and to serve him. The good news of the written Word of God is that this loving service is possible. In Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, man can be restored once again to love for God and neighbour and to all that this means for every aspect of man's functioning in God's creation.⁴⁹⁾

In disagreement with Thielicke, then, I do not find a necessary tension, dialectic, or dichotomy between creation and redemption, law and gospel. God's grace in Christ renews and re-directs our heart so that we can live before him and in his creation with obedient faith and faithful obedience. In Christ a man can now serve God freely. Free to be led by God's law-Word, our lives and God's creation can experience a new measure of peace and justice. There is a fundamental unity, then, between God's Word for creation and God's Word for redemption.

Eros and Agape: Expanded and Revised

Along with stating serious reservations about Thielicke's

49) Ibid.

view of ethics and the creation order, it is important to evaluate his understanding of eros and agape. Thielicke gives a helpful analysis of the interpenetration of eros and agape. He provides an intriguing, even if at times questionable, experiential and theoretical description of the deep subtleties of the unfolding and actualization of eros. But his initial definitions of eros and agape leave much to be desired. Thielicke resorts to Plato for content to the concept of eros.⁵⁰⁾ This attempt is one of the weakest places in Thielicke's ethics of sex. It is true that Thielicke mentions at the end of this section that Greek thought is abstract and not rooted in an idea of a personal God. But, in the meantime, he has already expounded on the Greek view of eros and makes little effort to critique this position. This is disappointing in light of his concern to think and write in Christian perspective. Furthermore, Thielicke's description of agape, though helpful, is quite brief. Thielicke's material on eros and agape, then, needs some correction and expansion.⁵¹⁾

More fundamentally, we need to ask if Thielicke has formulated correctly the relationship between eros and agape. Has he introduced a distinction that, in fact, is not a distinction? Should we say agape and eros or agape-eros? Is not God's love for man and man's love for God and neighbour one reality with many rich and varied expressions?

50) Thielicke, Vol.I, pp.28ff.

51) Cf. Gerhard Kittel, ed., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, trans. Goeffrey W. Bromily. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964.

It seems, for example, that God's love for man is both self-sacrificing agape but also need-fulfilment eros. God desires fellowship with his people and is "broken-hearted" when we go our own way. Or in the case of man, we find that we reach out in love to another person to satisfy the eros-need of human fellowship. But at the same time our intention is to build up the other person in self-giving agape. Is not agape-eros, then, one love-reality with various diverse and meaningful expressions. The unity of agape-eros seems to be affirmed in the Old Testament in the use of the one word "ahav" for all of the God-man expressions of love regardless of the specific content.⁵²⁾

In rejecting Thielicke's use of Plato to talk about eros and agape, therefore, we have not gone far enough. We need to reject the entire formulation "eros and agape" as a product of Greek and Scholastic rationalism. Has not the Greek-Scholastic dualism of "body and soul" given rise to the dualism of "eros and agape" where eros belongs to the body and agape resides in the soul? Rather we should see man as a body-person who loves - loves God, neighbour, and himself. There is no way to neatly dissect and label the complex motivations of man as he loves God, his neighbour, and himself. In many cases agape-eros is present in each concrete situation where love is expressed. I believe that Thielicke is pointing to this fact when he writes on the interpenetration of agape and eros in human sexuality. On the

52) Ibid., pp.21-55.

other hand, his approach to eros and agape tends to be formulated in a dualistic context.

Thielicke does speak forcefully of man as "individual totality" who exists in a fundamental unity before God and the neighbour.⁵³⁾ But soon he states that man's totality resolves itself into being and function.⁵⁴⁾ Once he has made this fundamental split, Thielicke then states that agape is directed towards the authentic being of a person while eros is directed towards the worth or function of a person. Also, he writes that God loves in man the image of God which is "buried" inside of man. This image is the real, authentic man. "God does not love the dust in which the pearl lies, but he loves the pearl lying in the dust."⁵⁵⁾ In an attempt, then, to distinguish eros and agape, Thielicke uses language that suggests a two-layer pearl and dust kind of anthropology where authentic being is on top and man as function is below. Agape is attached to authentic being and eros to man as function. Once Thielicke makes this division, it is difficult to see how agape would influence or lead man's functioning, or how eros is ever part of man's authentic being. Thielicke talks about the interpenetration of agape and eros, but his fundamental distinction of agape-being and eros-function leads us in a dualistic direction rather than into an integrated, holistic understanding.

To say that agape-eros is one love does not mean,

53) Thielicke, Vol.III, p.18.

54) Ibid., p.21.

55) Ibid., p.31.

however, that there is no distinction between agape and eros. Man in the image of God was made to love God and neighbour. Man to be man must love - open up his life to God and to the neighbour. If we call this agape-love, then, we can see how agape is the all-encompassing reality of life that should drive and lead every dimension of life, including eros. In this sense, we could talk about agapeic-politics in which agape-love is realized as justice. Agape-love in economics becomes stewardship; in ethics agape becomes trust or fidelity. In other words, all of human thinking and acting needs to be directed by agape-love. Thieliicke speaks to this point when indicating how agape must lead libido. But he often speaks of agape as transforming eros and the other dimensions of love. It is more accurate to say that agape, as the all-embracing power and demand of life, gives a God and neighbour-serving direction to each dimension of human functioning. This approach avoids the possible misunderstanding that a dimension of human life like eros is inherently sinful and needs to be radically changed or transformed by agape. Agape, then, would be seen as a divine addition which must redeem perverted eros. Rather, we should understand eros as a creationally good structure in human life which, as a creative power for union and communion, can be led in a good or sinful direction. It is agape that leads eros in a God-pleasing and man-serving direction. With hearts renewed in Jesus Christ this agape-direction is possible.

Agape, then, is at the center of man's existence as a call

to love God and neighbour. Eros is a God-created dimension of human life pulsating with psychic energy and drive for union and communion. Agape without eros ignores the creational humanness of man in God's image. Eros without agape is raw power than can become destructive. We do not need, therefore, to place agape over and against eros in a divine-human tension. We do not need to reconcile eros with agape. Agape-eros belong together.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the weaknesses in Helmut Thielicke's theological and sexual ethics, he has provided the Christian community with an insightful discussion of ethical issues. His thinking on eros and agape has been formulated against the background of a dualistic theological position. His understanding of eros and creation order leaves much to be desired. But Thielicke's work is in many ways a pioneering effort. The Christian church has not been noted for its grasp of and involvement with 20th century ethical concerns. Seen in this light, Thielicke's Theological Ethics represents a major step forward. His reflection on eros and agape must be appreciated as a significant contribution to the church in the area of sexual responsibility in an age of sexual chaos.

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