

A **little**  
exercise  
for  
young  
theologians

HELMUT  
THIELICKE

Introduction by MARTIN E. MARTY

## A Little Exercise for Young Theologians

*Helmut Thielicke, Charles L. Taylor (Translator)*

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**A Little Exercise for Young Theologians** Helmut Thielicke , Charles L. Taylor (Translator)  
Introduction by Martin E. Marty

A veteran theologian and minister offers his wise counsel to beginners in the field on the difficulties of practicing theology in a church often skeptical of theological pursuit. Thielicke stresses the importance of maintaining one's spiritual health in the course of technical theological inquiry.

## A Little Exercise for Young Theologians Details

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## **From Reader Review A Little Exercise for Young Theologians for online ebook**

### **Adam Shields says**

Short Review: This is a classic book of advice for a young theologian and pastor. I wanted to read it because it is the book that A Little Book for New Theologians by K Kelly is based on. This is a similar book of advice, but the chapters are shorter and the book as a whole is shorter. I think it is worth reading, but if you are going to read just one, read Kelly's new version. It is theologically richer (at least by my reading) and the slightly longer chapters have a bit more depth.

My full review is on my blog at <http://bookwi.se/little-exercise-for-...>

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### **Jon Patterson says**

Such an excellent and important short read for anyone studying theology. I was convicted several times in these 41 pages, Thielicke knows well the temptations of a student of theology and exposes them gracefully and effectively.

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### **Don says**

Talbot Course: Theological Research Method

Let me save you \$\$\$ by telling you what this book is about in one sentence: Learning theology at the expense of your own spiritual health is never worth it.

It's an extremely short book. =)

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### **Adam says**

This is a wonderfully convicting preamble to Thielicke's introduction to theology lecture that he would give at the University of Hamburg in the 1950's and 1960's.

Thielicke's overall point is that theology must be a "second-person" endeavor. It is a dialogue between a theologian, God, and God's people. A theologian who divorces his work from his relationship with Christ mediated through the Church, His Body, will cease to be a theologian of any value. Theology is a science; it has its own methods and its own language. However, it is unlike any other science in that it is worshipful, participatory and relational, involving both truth and love.

I realized after reading this that I have fallen into most of the pitfalls that Thielicke warns the young theologian about. In college, while studying theology and philosophy, I tended to side with whomever I was reading at the time, making his or her words my own. At seminary I was an "overgrown youth" when it came

to theology. A child does not sing when his or her voice is changing (so says Thielicke!), and students hitting "theological puberty" should remember this. If I could only take back those embarrassing discussions I had with friends and professors where I assumed I knew everything... Finally, at graduate school I fell into the temptation to elevate truth over love (or even equating the two). Thielicke shows what becomes of the theologian who does this. He or she becomes a Pharisaical husk of a person, a total boor who, in his or her distance from people, ceases to be a theologian of any value whatsoever.

Thielicke's book is a "must-read" for any student of theology or young minister. It is humbling, surprising, and even humorous.

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### **Alex Houseknecht says**

I like this little book. For me, it's a good reminder not to use theology as a tool to shame others. I have seen (and personally experienced) too many instances of new theologians using cumbersome language and complicated ideas to silence those they don't agree with. It is a kind of shaming that, especially when I had no understanding of the language, put me off to the idea of theology altogether. I can only imagine what it does to those who have already experienced so much shame from the church already.

The problem that I could potentially see with this book is its impact on newer theologians who have experienced harm from previous church experiences.

When I was first introduced to ideas like 'hermeneutics' and 'eschatology' it was a glorious and freeing time. For my whole life I had been stuck inside of a faith-only belief system where any kind of questioning or challenging was practically evil. When I began to realize the vast academic arena of theology, I was able to revel in a diversity of thought, and excitedly intellectualize about all the things that were once forbidden to me.

The author argues that theology should not replace faith, however, I believe that it is much more important for those newly introduced to the theological realm to play, and allow themselves to be ennobled by a newfound freedom.

But, it still feels like a valuable reminder for any experienced theologian.

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### **Amanda says**

Though this is an old book, written about the practice of studying theology, it doesn't really read like one. Thielicke is definitely an intellectual, but he writes this in a way that is both humorous, sarcastic, and light, while gently convicting young theologians toward grace and a more complete and fully formed grasp of their faith. For anyone remotely interested in God, ministry, or just applying faith in daily application, I recommend this book. It's a quick, but very impactful read.

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### **Jacob Wilson says**

I've read through this book at least 3 times during my college and seminary experience. It has shaped my

understanding of the relationship between spiritual life and academic theological study more than any other book I've read. It was crucial for my own humility and spiritual development then as it is now.

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### **Winn says**

I really wish I'd had this book in college. And seminary. And every year from seminary until now.

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### **Mayowa Adebiyi says**

This should be required reading for anyone who studies or intends to seriously study Theology. Otherwise the young Theologian remains in puberty, "fitted like a country boy with breeches that are too big, into which he must still grow up in the same way that one who is to be confirmed must also still grow into the long trousers of the Catechism. Meanwhile, they hang loosely around his body, and this ludicrous sight of course is not beautiful"

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### **Vince Cancilla says**

Sobering little volume...a must read for all theology students.

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### **Edwin Smith says**

#### **Short and striking, a concentrated humble pill**

Grateful that a class in Systematic Theology should begin with a reading that places these things in their proper place: studies under community, community under devotions, devotions under prayer, and prayer under Christ himself, the source and center of all wisdom and knowledge.

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### **Osvaldo says**

I read *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* by 20th century, German theologian Helmut Thielicke several years ago, and at the time I understood its basic warning of not allowing theological study to puff one up with conceit (although in some quarters the student today probably also needs encouragement to see his endeavors as worthy and valuable tasks despite societal apathy, indifference or disdain towards theological matters). Upon reading it this time as one of the books recommended by my school's theological program in preparation for seminary, I was struck by his pastoral manner in encouraging the theological student (in this case, me) to see the positive spiritual formation that theological studies does and should have on the student. Although Thielicke is addressing a mainline, European, and Lutheran theological student, his words still resonate with me, as some of the challenges are shared by 21st century, American, evangelical students. First

there is the challenge of mistrust or disapproval by the laity of theological education because of the skepticism sometimes imbibed by students, but also, more frequently, the intellectual pride evinced by the young theological student. Thielicke admonishes the student to take these misgivings seriously:

If the theologian, however, does not take more seriously the objections of the ordinary washerwoman and the simple hourly-wage earner, and if he then thinks - he would hardly express it this way - that the spiritual proletariat is not aware of the delicate questions and must have nothing to do with them - which is just the way of that esoteric club - surely something is not right with theology. (4)

Thielicke does not take the layperson to task for having misconceptions about the enterprise of theological study. Rather, he places the onus on the student to hear his fellow Christian's misgivings and to humbly be corrected by that which is being offered, and to realize that his or her studies, research, and analysis are done in the context of faith, that of his or her own and that of the church, of his fellow Christians.

The problem of intellectual pride is part of the natural process of growth in the theological student. He is grappling with concepts, ideas, and doctrines that the Church and Jews have wrestled with for thousands of years. Part of the problem is the chasm that exists between a student's actual experience with the Triune God as He saves and sanctifies the believer, and the students mistaking of his intellectual cognition and assent to those realities as equal to a strong faith. The student is beginning to learn about the strength of the object of his faith (God and His promises), and such faith will over time grow and be strengthened as the student sees his own need and must cast himself wholly upon God for all his consolation - from sin, from suffering, and from the siren song of affirmation or glory provided by this world. Thielicke writes:

In theology we are dealing with the form which reflection gives to spiritual experiences, as they have been developed through the centuries and especially by the great figures of church history. A twenty-year-old is taught, say, to think about the problems of the Trinity. Over these, down through the centuries, the most bitter battles have been fought with life at stake. To these problems the great leaders have bent mighty spiritual energies and behind them lie quite definite spiritual experiences. You can see that the young theologian has by no means yet grown up to these doctrines in his own spiritual development, even if he understands intellectually rather well the logic of the system - that is, its crust of what once was spiritual, and the legitimate and logical course, so to speak, of its developments in the history of doctrine. (10)

In terms of how a student is to approach theological study, Thielicke reminds us that since theology is the study of God, "the truth of theology is concerned with the very love of God." To use theological knowledge as a source of pride (because by it one possesses something another individual presumably lacks) and that can be used as a weapon to browbeat the "unlearned" is "devilish" as "the joy of possession can kill love" (17).

Some further admonitions from Thielicke include the fact that the student, in his or her studies, is subject to Christ and his church and should submit to their care. He reminds us that "the 'subject' of theology, Jesus Christ, can only be regarded rightly if we are ready to meet Him on the plane where He is active, that is,

within the Christian church" (23). In addition Thielicke notes:

...the church has the prior right to question us, even if it does not and cannot understand the details of our work; for we are pursuing our theological study in its very midst as surely as we are members of that church...[the church's questions] are therefore questions about our soundness in the faith. The church is our pastor. (25-6)

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Theology is also prayer. As one learns, it is God who is speaking, and one should reflect about what He says and speak back to him. And of course, a student who is not saturated in Scriptures, who does not read the Bible "uncommonly often" is "spiritually sick" (40). This is a book I will surely revisit in the future and I am sure by God's grace it will repay great dividends in my doing so.

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### **Markus says**

This is a short (41 pages), gem-of-a-text that I read for the first time in seminary and, subsequently, I have made it a practice to re-read it at least once a year for the last number of years. Cannot more highly recommend it as "advice" for young theologians of any age...

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### **David says**

Helmut Thielicke, professor at the University of Hamburg, has written a wonderful preface to the task of dogmatic theology. Written primarily for freshmen, Thielicke points out all the all-too-familiar traps that young theologians fall into. They learn exciting, new, abstract concepts and theological jargon in the university classrooms and then bring that back to their bible study discussions at church only to dominate the atmosphere and make their less learned peers feel embarrassed.

Because of such instances, the church has harbored resentment over the years towards theologians and have maintained unhealthy, yet understandable, skepticisms towards the scientific study of theology.

This book acknowledges those concerns. Indeed, young theologians are often disproportionate, walking around with enlarged heads and smaller hearts. They feel intellectually and spiritually superior because of their erudition. Why does this happen? The university emphasis of knowledge decouples truth from love. But true dogmatics cannot proceed without holding onto both. Otherwise, "truth is employed as a means to personal triumph and at the same time as a means to kill, which is in the starker possible contrast with love."

Again, while this is a book mainly geared towards theological freshmen, it is something every theologian, no matter how far into their careers, would benefit from. I empathize with a lot of what Thielicke has written in these pages. I only wish I had read it when I was a freshman in college. Regardless, even as a graduate student of theology, I find its admonishments pertinent and worth returning to again in the future. Theologians must never lose sight of those things that make their work of any value, viz. faith, hope, love, church, and prayer.

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## Spencer says

### Book Review: A Little Exercise for Young Theologians by Helmut Thielicke

“A bon voyage greeting to a person venturing for the first season into theological studies” begins the book titled, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* by Helmut Thielicke (vii). As a theologian and preacher, among other roles, long mature in his career, Thielicke offers advice to the budding theologian about to enter his or her seminary studies. The book, or exercise as he calls it, appears to be a warning to those who wish to become theologians. Although “practicing parsons” (2) may benefit from such a work, the warning to the young theologian is (in my own words) to be patient while book knowledge and faith lead to maturity. Thielicke refers to this time in a young theologian’s life as “theological puberty” (12): a time when the young theologian should be allowed to grow, and not teach or preach until maturity is found.

The book begins with an introduction by Martin Marty. In it, Marty sets the stage for the book by explaining the intent of the book, a petite biography of Thielicke, certain challenges to the reader, and the necessity for such a work. The body of the work finds its setting in the classroom; apparently, that of Thielicke beginning an introductory theology class to a room full of students wishing to begin studies in theology. He begins with the assertion that the “ordinary Christian” (3) “fears theology” (3). Here, Thielicke sets some important expectations for the young theologian on how his or her studies in theology will be perceived by these “ordinary Christians” as well as some of the wisdom in these simple concerns. Rather than dismiss these fears, Thielicke actually gives credibility to the fears of intellectualism and “wisdom of the world” (4), thus initiating the warning as described in the opening paragraph of this review. Subsequent chapters describe the arguments by which these fears are supported: the arguments from principle and those from experience. To make his case, Thielicke offers up several examples of the progression of knowledge and some consequences of this development for the young theologian. Examples such as the “Home-Coming” (6) for the first-semester student who sarcastically and harshly deals with his “unlearned friends” (7) with his “strange learned words” (7) quickly make the case for the fears of the church. In another example, Thielicke describes this same type of student as achieving “victory” (14) with his technical terms over the layman; yet, it was not victory that was achieved, rather, an effective “smother[ing:] [of:] the first little flame of a man’s ...spiritual life” (14). Thielicke describes these situations as “symptoms of a real disease” (16); that disease being conceit, vanity, and pride. The problem with this, as Thielicke describes, is that this disease runs contrary to “the truth of theology” ...that is “the very love of God” (17). The fruit of such produces a “minister who operates not to instruct but to destroy...” (19).

Thielicke informs the young theologian that the church has the right to question additional knowledge outside of simple faith and that these questions must be taken seriously. He is obviously concerned, and thus warns, that the young theologian may have his or her “life of faith” (32) threatened by intellectual enlightenment. He presents a warning sign for the student who notices not the relationship with God when he reads scripture, but merely the “technical reference” or “object of exegetical endeavor” (33). Thielicke urges that the young theologian maintain “as a background to theological work”... “a vigorous spiritual life” (37). A life grounded in reading the Bible and making the Bible the “cornerstone” (40) of one’s preaching and teaching.

In my opinion, Thielicke’s book is a perfect example of saying a lot in few words. One would not expect a forty-one page book to offer much; however, for the intended audience (myself included), more was gained in this short “exercise” than in most of the multi-hundred page books read by this reviewer in theology up to this point. I only wish someone had provided this book to me thirteen years ago when I became a Christian; on fire to have “victory” over all of my lost friends and family members. Thielicke’s analysis of how young theologians quickly get off track with technical terms and a desire to crush the competition is right on. While

reading these sections, my mind wandered to my work with my own mother in trying to “win” her for Christ not long after my own conversion. I beat on her with every theological point I could muster; however, it was only after I gave up these “intellectual” attempts and began loving her as mom again that she accepted Christ. I was convicted when she stated, “when you started loving me, I heard everything you had said”. Being a scientist, I was quite fond of “intellectual” arguments for Christianity. After becoming a Christian, I quickly fell into the trap that Thielicke warned of by reading the Bible only to find my next point, and lost sight of any relationship with God. Only after growing through these pubescent stages did I really find relationship with God and a love for the lost. This book is an excellent resource for anyone who wishes to do ministry work of any kind. For young theologians, it will hopefully bring dangers and pitfalls to one’s awareness along with warning signs of “the disease” to be mindful of. For the more experienced minister, this book should put concerns of the “ordinary Christian” into perspective as well as challenge him to not lose sight of the personal relationship with God that is necessary to be an effective preacher and teacher. It took nearly two readings of the book to isolate what I would call weaknesses. First, the introduction by Marty made much more sense after I read the book. My initial reading of the introduction was not overly useful and a bit slow in going. Second, the book used certain technical terms and foreign terms that should have been defined more clearly; especially considering that the audience for the book was to be those entering theological study. Here perhaps the brevity of the book was a slight hindrance to some readers not familiar with terms such as “excursi” (1), “obiter dicta” (1), “erudition” (14), and possibly even “dogmatics” and “exegetical” (33).

Overall, the book was wonderful and much appreciated by this reviewer. The book serves as an excellent reminder that an education in theology as well as theological vocabulary is useless unless that education is grounded in strong spirituality and a love for those we are leading and serving in ministry.

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