

# Thielicke on the Modern Welfare State

by Daniel F. Walker

**H**elmut Thielicke was a leading Christian theologian of the post-World War II era. Early in his career, Thielicke was removed from his teaching position at the University of Heidelberg because of his criticism of the Nazi regime. Late in the war, he was allowed to preach and informally teach in Stuttgart. Thielicke's lectures and sermons were privately (and illegally) published, bringing a Christian message to thousands of people.

After the war, Thielicke held high positions at the universities of Tübingen and Hamburg, and several published collections of his sermons brought him acclaim in the English-speaking world. What established him as a leading theologian, however, were two multi-volume works: *The Evangelical Faith* and *Theological Ethics*.

In *Theological Ethics*, Thielicke addressed the dangers of governmental paternalism. While Thielicke did accept a role for government in providing a "safety net" for its citizens, he expressed deep alarm at the reach and effects of the modern welfare state.

Thielicke defined the "rationalization" of the welfare state's process as "organizing the effort in such a way that a maximum of production is achieved with a minimum of expenditure," thus infusing impersonaliza-

tion into the welfare process and depersonalizing the participants. Direct, personal caring would be reduced to a minimum, "and even then the final stage will be a welfare office desk or the home mailbox."<sup>1</sup> Forms, computers, and adding machines—not individual love of one's neighbor—would drive the process.

The greater the reliance of the welfare-state machinery upon the depersonalization of givers and recipients, the greater the effects. Unlike many theologians, who improperly interpret the New Testament as a manifesto for "compassion" by force of government, Thielicke recognized the undesirable consequences, economic and personal, of the modern welfare state.

## Individual Initiative and the Burgeoning Welfare State

External consequences of the growing welfare state would be an increasing tax burden, decreased investment in the means of production, and a strain on credit; a further danger was that of welfare "benefits" threatening "to become the equivalent of a normal wage" or, even where not, "a temptation . . . for people to quit their job, justify their action on other grounds, and make up the loss in income by doing part-time work on the side. All this leads to chaotic tendencies in the labor market."

Internal, personal consequences of the

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rationalized welfare state also were serious. As the modern welfare state embraces more “duties,” it “not only reduces individual initiative but also kindles suspicion of the welfare work of other groups” and “demands that all activities which impinge upon its monopoly must first receive official authorization.” While American governments do not have a monopoly on providing welfare services, Thielicke’s concern is valid; think of charitable organizations having to obtain 501(c)(3) recognition from the Internal Revenue Service before donors’ contributions can be used to reduce individual tax liabilities assessed by the government.

## State Welfare versus Genuine Caring

Of deep concern to Thielicke was the inner consequence where “welfare becomes the object of a ‘claim’: In time of need, when I cannot care for myself, I claim to have a right to be cared for; the state is obliged to assist me whether or not I act or am capable of acting to help myself.” As Thielicke said, “welfare is thus transferred from the ethical to the legal plane.”

Anticipating more contemporary arguments, Thielicke noted that supporters of welfare “rights” would emphasize the alleged “degrading” nature of people having to rely upon private charity, of being a mere object of benefactors’ good will—thus violating the recipients’ “dignity.”

Thielicke found that argument “meretricious,” making “a false distinction between welfare as a legal act regulated by the state and welfare as the function of private, improvising love.” Genuine Christian love of one’s neighbor does not degrade the recipient of aid. Genuine caring for another person is not mechanical, nor is it a “subject-object relation between giver and recipient,” but it is a partnership. Within the Christian context, “the giver knows that he is one who, in relation to God, receives without merit, and who must therefore act towards his neighbor as God has acted toward him.” This is a dignity far different

than that contemplated by supporters of the modern welfare state.

For Thielicke, a society in which the government “provides in principle for every kind of disability and the helplessness of old age” would alter “fatefully the relationship between the generations.” Families with sufficient financial strength should care for family members who need help.

Look at America now; older middle-income Americans are encouraged to divest themselves of their assets in order to qualify for Medicaid so that taxpayers at large must subsidize the costs of warehousing the artificially impoverished in nursing homes—in the name of “independent living” and “not being a burden to the children.” Thielicke said that such a welfare apparatus for caring “would make parenthood a temporary function: When the function is fulfilled, parents simply step down and enter another sphere of existence.” So it seems today in the United States.

Again anticipating contemporary battles, Thielicke asserted that opportunities should be present for people to plan and “pay in advance for later pensions and other benefits (medical benefits, etc.).” Aside from the economic advantages to be gained by Individual Retirement Accounts, medical savings accounts, and other similar measures, the greatest benefit from such planning opportunities is that citizens can be *active* participants in the continuity of their lives rather than being mere passive recipients of whatever favors are doled out by a particular government. Genuine welfare depends upon personal involvement, but “the radical welfare state aims at state pensions for all citizens without distinction, irrespective of need or achievement. . . . It has become instead the welfare robot, devoid of any personal features at all.” Does any of this ring true, in light of talk about welfare state recipients being given ATM-like cards to “access” their government benefits?

Ultimately, Thielicke characterized the State as an “emergency order” to which “we should commit to the state, not everything we can, but only what we must. . . . [T]he state should give up as many tasks as

possible and commit them to other agencies.”

Thielicke was not fooled by those who would equate “compassion” with a pervasive welfare state and greater taxes. Those who “farm out to the machinery of the state all care of the needy” are “refusing to be human toward a fellow human being.” Delegating a personal moral responsibility to a “robot” shows a *lack* of involvement in others’ lives. The modern welfare state cannot be a substitute for proper love of one’s neighbor. Even if the welfare state “worked,” was efficient, and delivered to or on behalf of recipients most of each dollar allocated for welfare—it still would do damage.

How? Why?

According to Thielicke, “The responsibility of love cannot be transferred. Love that is hidden away in some mechanical

apparatus ‘gains me nothing.’ And when I am without love I myself ‘am nothing.’ (I Cor. 13:2). The perfection of the machinery can actually deliver up the person to nothingness.”

Those who would invoke Christian compassion in defense of the modern welfare state would be wise to consider the warnings of Helmut Thielicke. He looked beyond superficial sentiment and good intentions associated with government-driven caring, and found tremendous dangers awaiting the society that diminishes the personal dimension of caring for one’s neighbor in exchange for a mechanical state of “social justice.” □

1. Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1979), vol. II, p. 301. Subsequent quotations are from the same volume, pp. 302–317.

# The One-Minute Shed

by Donald G. Smith

A friend of mine once spent a weekend building a cabana for the guests who would be using his pool. A neighbor must have objected because a building inspector arrived early on Monday and told him that it had to come down—no building permit.

My friend, a quick-witted man, tried an impromptu defensive maneuver, asking what could be built without a permit. The inspector rattled off a list of outbuilding structures that were allowable and when he came to “tool shed,” the light went on. “Just what constitutes a tool shed?” The answer was simple: “Tools.”

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So, the two men solved the problem that very moment. My friend found a hammer, hung it inside the door, and created a tool shed in one minute. The inspector approved and left with no further objections. The hammer had made it legal.

To me the story hinges not so much on the absurdity of the regulation but on the attitude of the inspector, who saw neither humor nor disgust in the event. It was a ho-hum, case-closed matter and he went off to his next assignment with another problem out of the way.

This has been my objection to the bureaucratic mind since I was old enough to know that there was such a thing. Why don’t these people object to an obviously ridiculous