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AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF PROTESTANT THEOLOGIANS AND
COMING TO TERMS WITH THE PAST

*Helmut Thielicke as a Case Study for Postwar German
discourse on suffering*

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In August of 1945, Hans Asmussen declared the „hour of the church“ (rather than the „hour zero“). Such optimistic hope in the reconstruction efforts were less grounded in the attempt to raise the moral and political awareness of Germans for the suffering of their victims, but more in the effort to stabilize the insecure and damaged identity of Germans through a re-moralization campaign. Theological and church-related circles employed a language of suffering, victimization and injustice—but of the suffering of Germans and of the injustice done to Germans. Such discourse of self-victimization characterized the immediate postwar years until the late 1950s; it changed gradually only during the social upheavals of the 1960s, but never completely disappeared in Germany.

Such mentalities are also reflected in the post-1945 autobiographies of German Protestant theologians. In my contribution to the book *Mit Blick auf die Täter: Fragen an die deutsche Theologie nach 1945* (2006), I have begun to examine these autobiographies as a genre by reading them through the model of age specific, political cohorts. Focusing on select examples, I hoped to demonstrate the usefulness of a discursive analysis.

In my paper today, I am limiting myself to just one case study, namely the depiction of the immediate postwar years in Helmut Thielicke's autobiography. Thielicke describes a conflict with the French occupation policy while teaching in

the theology department at Tübingen University in the fall of 1946. The French became suspicious of his populist lectures. Thieliicke's pastoral concerns for the returning German soldiers and German soldiers in captivity in Allied internment camps express his larger concerns for the suffering of Germans – at the neglect of the suffering of others, namely those who were victimized under Nazi Germany. Questions about suffering are mixed with those about guilt. This becomes especially apparent in a popular and controversial Easter sermon Thieliicke delivered in 1947. This sermon typifies conservative-postwar interpretations of German history. A year later, a booklet was published, entitled „Die Schuld der Anderen“ (The Guilt of Others), which documented this sermon plus a letter exchange between Thieliicke and another Protestant theologian, Hermann. Diem was very critical of Thieliicke's sermon, especially his use of the „guilt of others,“ by which Thieliicke referred to the guilt of the Allied forces vis-à-vis the German postwar population.