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The President's Page: Tribute in Honor of Gerhard F. Hasel

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Dr. Gerhard F. Hasel died Thursday afternoon, August 11, in an automobile accident near Ogden, Utah. He was returning in a rented automobile to his motel where he was scheduled to participate in the annual meetings of the Biblical Research Institute Science Committee (BRISCO) when he was killed.

At the time of his death Dr. Hasel was the J. N. Andrews Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Theology and the Director of the Ph.D./Th.D. programs at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Many considered Dr. Hasel the foremost theologian in the church today, an opinion that I fully share. Since *JATS* plans a future memorial issue in honor of Dr. Hasel, I will just note that in addition to being a past President of ATS and its current vice-president for publications, Gerhard Hasel was my personal friend. Therefore, I would like to share with our readers a few of my personal thoughts about my dear friend, Gerhard, that it was my privilege to share with his family and friends at the funeral service in Berrien Springs:

On August 16th, I came off the trail into the valley floor of Yosemite National Park. This was the culmination of a seven-day cross-country pack trip with family and friends. I stepped into the arms of my wife who told me the unbelievable news that Gerhard had been killed in a car accident on the previous Thursday.

As our hike had been in such a remote area, attempts to contact me had been unsuccessful. We frantically rushed to the airport in

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order to catch the last possible flight that would allow us to arrive in Berrien Springs just in time for the funeral. Through tears and disbelief that such a terrible event could possibly have happened, I used the airline napkins, the only paper I could find at hand, upon which to write a tribute to my fallen friend and colleague.

I first knew Dr. Gerhard Hasel as a professor of Issues in Old Testament Theology at Andrews University Seminary. Later, I knew him as a colleague—we served on many committees and traveled across the globe, including behind the iron curtain. Through this association, I came to know him as a close friend.

As a student, I remember Gerhard's warm greetings and friendly smiles in the Seminary hallways. He took a very serious and genuine interest in students. Upon further reflection in more mature years, I also appreciate the discipline that he inspired in his students.

Not only was Dr. Hasel very warm and personable, he was also highly intellectual in a way that stood out among numerous other capable professors. Instead of using his reasoning powers to criticize and dissect the Bible, he used the Sword of the Word as the basis for analyzing and laying bare the criticism of the critics. Even the intellect was in need of conversion to God's viewpoint. This new approach was startling, even unimaginable at first. However, upon further reflection, it became the foundation for my own study and for that of many fellow students.

What made Gerhard's career so outstanding was his commitment to God and submission to the Word of God as The Guide not only to his life, but also to his theological thinking. Gerhard placed his life in God's hands and humbly gave God the credit for any achievements.

Gerhard was a modern-day renaissance man—truly informed on a plethora of subjects. Though many are content to specialize in a specific discipline such as Old Testament or Systematic Theology, Gerhard's expertise extended to a diverse array of complimentary topics—Old Testament, New Testament, Archaeology, History of the Church, and Systematic Theology. His knowledge of my own work, completely out of his field of focus, never ceased to amaze me. Gerhard's vast knowledge coupled with an incredible memory enabled him to work at the cutting edge of a multitude of topics.

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Gerhard was prodigious. At the time of his death, he had 319 scholarly articles in print with many more currently being published. In addition, he has published 19 books and several revisions. In many ways, Gerhard was the greatest theologian this church has known.

He was a well known scholar. I can remember a number of occasions when I was with him at a scholarly convention in the hallways or elevators, he was constantly stopped by professors desiring to tell him how much his text books were appreciated in the classroom. Often, everyone in the elevator would acknowledge him before we disembarked. He was also well known not only in scholarly circles outside of the church, but also by scholars, pastors, and lay people alike within the church. His extensive lectureship was appreciated in North, Central, and South America, Africa, Europe, Asia, and the former Soviet Union. Gerhard was a people person with tremendous ability to network with a broad range of individuals. It is amazing to see the large number of people who have told me they had a special relationship with him.

As a result of his travels and his ability to network with many people, he know the church world wide very well, both its joys and problems theologically and administratively.

He was also well informed politically. Discussions on events in Russia, Bosnia, Afghanistan, or wherever, were always informative. Gerhard could fill in not only the details, but also the inner workings and the history, that which made an event what it really was, not something reduced to just bare facts.

Gerhard was an excellent administrator. As dean of the Seminary, he balanced the budget, built up the student body, strengthened the Seminary theologically, turned its emphasis in a more practical direction, and achieved ten-year accreditation for the Seminary. At the time he left the deanship of the Seminary, he had the support of over 80% of the faculty and close to 100% of the student body, an achievement that almost any administrator would envy.

Gerhard had a very strong dedication to the church. In his high school years, he took a regional test in the sciences and received the highest score. After he topped the scores for the next two levels, he found himself competing at the national level against nine other

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students, together representing the brightest high school minds in all of Germany and once again received the top score. He was offered full scholarship to the university of his choice. In the emerging powerful economy of post-war Germany, his career potential could have been tremendous.

It is rare to find in one person Gerhard's combination of intellect, resourcefulness, administrative abilities, people and networking skills, political knowledge, language and communication skills and a deep dedication to God. In total light of these qualities, Gerhard could have become a major scientist or he also could have been president of one of Germany's major corporations. Instead, he dedicated his life to the study and proclamation of Seventh-day Adventist theology to the benefit of us all.

Because of the tremendous depth of his theological understanding, his creativity, and his fidelity to the Bible as the Word of God, Gerhard was often under fire, even to the extent of slander and false accusation. Yet Gerhard never spoke maliciously of his detractors. In the heat of the battle, it would have been easy to have cried martyr, but he never allowed that complex to be placed upon him.

Shortly before his death, Gerhard told me that he felt his most important contribution in life was his efforts for the Adventist Theological Society. Although not a prime figure in the founding of the society, his talents were invaluable in bringing the society to maturation. I would like to thank him personally for his contribution to the society as its past president, for putting the *Journal* on a strong footing, for establishing the dissertation series, the monograph series, and for his work on various symposiums dealing with revelation-inspiration, creation, and the judgment. It would take another article by itself to completely describe his contribution to the society.

Very few people bring about major changes in the history of thought. Gerhard was one of those individuals. Like a Martin Luther, or a John Calvin, he brought a renewed understanding of the centrality of the Bible to Adventist thought.

A number of years ago, Gerhard was a member of a committee meeting at Andrews that was studying questions relating to 1844 and the judgment. One morning in the apartment shared by three

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committee participants, all editors from the *Review*, one started singing, "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow." This didn't happen very often and the other two editors gathered around to discover the reasons for the curious occasion. When asked, the first editor responded, "Thank God for young theologians like Gerhard who can help us solve some of our long-standing theological problems."

In one of our last conversations Gerhard asked, "Ed, when are you going to write your book on methods in theology?" If I ever have the opportunity to write this book, Gerhard, how I wish that I could tell you how much I will miss your encouragement, constructive criticism, and praise.

In closing I think it is important to mention the family side of Gerhard. At the recent memorial service Gerhard's son, Michael, recounted the attention, love and affection that their father bestowed upon him and his sisters, Marlena and Melissa. They emphasized how Gerhard was able to make time for them, in spite of his very busy schedule as a scholar and churchman. The humor and affection Gerhard displayed at home and with friends testify to how well-rounded a man he was. A special tribute should also be given to Gerhard's wife, Hilde, who so fully supported her husband while he was writing and traveling for the Lord. Hilde, Gerhard's loving wife, more than anyone else paid a great price in sacrificing time with her husband. The direct beneficiaries of her sacrifice have been countless individuals around the world who have been so blessed by Gerhard's writing and preaching.

Husband, father, teacher, scholar, statesman, pioneer, pastor, man of God, you have given us so much. God give us the grace to follow in your steps, and complete the work you have begun.