A MIGHTY OAK HAS FALLEN:
A TRIBUTE TO DR. GERHARD F. HASEL

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the centuries of time, great leaders for God--Moses, Deborah, Elijah, Nehemiah, John the Baptist, Paul, Luther, Calvin, Owen, Wesley, James and Ellen White, to mention but a few--have been characterized by a resolute faith in God, and a holy zeal for His honor and glory. The zeal spoken of here should be understood in the manner defined by the prominent Anglican scholar, James I. Packer:

It is not fanaticism; it is not wildness; it is not irresponsible enthusiasm; it is not any form of pushy egoism. It is rather, a humble, reverent, businesslike, single-minded commitment to the hallowing of God's name and the doing of his will.[1] Whenever situations occur in which God's truth and honor are being jeopardized, rather than allowing the matter to go away by default, God raises up these leaders to impress the issue upon people's attention in order "to compel if possible a change of heart about it--even at personal risk."[2] The effectiveness of their respective ministries abide in the force and power of their lives and the eloquence of the truth which they teach. But because their convictions are stronger than their apathy, such leaders are not only admired, but they are also misunderstood.

The late Dr. Gerhard F. Hasel possessed and displayed the above kind of faith and zeal during his ministry as pastor, theologian, and church administrator.[3]

The tribute that follows was delivered at his funeral, on August 18, 1994, at the Village Seventh-day Adventist Church, Berrien Springs, Michigan.[4] Borrowing the title from a Ghanaian proverb, the eulogy is designed not only to measure the height of the deceased, but also to give comfort, assurance, and direction to the bereaved. Beyond its immediate context, however, this tribute may also be read as an encouragement to those who find themselves in grief, on account of their dedication to and proclamation of the message of The Magnificent Disappointment.

"A MIGHTY OAK HAS FALLEN"

Today, in Africa we would say, "A Mighty Oak Has Fallen!" For at this solemn hour, and in this quiet place, we have come to bid farewell to our pastor, our teacher, and our friend.
A Mighty Oak Has Fallen

It was here, in this small Berrien Village, that this world-class scholar chose to spend much of his professional life. It was here that he lived, worked, and suffered. It is therefore, significant that the world has compressed itself into this little township so as to pay its final tribute to a gallant Christian statesman, a courageous preacher of the gospel, and a visionary church leader.

But as we pay fitting tributes to Dr. Gerhard F. Hasel, we need not forget that during his lifetime, his labors were not always appreciated. He was often misunderstood, sometimes misrepresented, and occasionally vilified.[6] Permit me to share with you, from Dr. Hasel's experiences, some of the things he has taught me on how to respond to criticisms:

1. Employing Wit and Humor. Dr. Hasel earned his worldwide recognition by demonstrating that it is possible to become an eminent scholar without surrendering Biblical truth. But those who misunderstood him saw this effort as turning back the clock of "progressive" Adventism by 27 years.

If Dr. Hasel were to respond to this, I think, he would just smile, and with characteristic sense of humor and wit, he would whisper: "I wish I could have turned the clock back by 2,000 years--to the days when Christ established the foundations of Seventh-day Adventism."

2. Citing Historical Precedence. Dr. Hasel possessed an unwavering and a determined spirit. But those who could not comprehend the force and persuasiveness of his moral and Biblical convictions, misinterpreted his commitment as dogmatic, intolerant, and even authoritarian.

If Dr. Hasel were to respond to this, I think, he would reply in words reminiscent of Martin Luther: "My conscience is bound to the word of God, and unless I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture I cannot do otherwise."

3. Illustrating with Biblical Examples. Dr. Hasel prized the quest for Biblical truth over theological tranquility. But those who were uncomfortable with him would have preferred him to be an Obadiah in the house of Ahab and Jezebel. They wanted him to maintain the status quo, rather than rock the boat in Ahab's house and risk the lives of God's prophets.

If Dr. Hasel were to respond, I think, he would open his Bible to 1 Kings 18, and after a rigorous exegesis and an insightful theologization, he would conclude in this manner: "Although God can use god-fearing Obadihas in times of apostasy in Israel, the roles of Elighas are equally indispensable. Without Elighas to confront Ahab, Obadihas will always be forced to `find grass to save [Ahab's] horses and mules alive,' instead of finding grace to save men and women for eternity. Therefore, Elighas are needed--despite the fact that they are always misrepresented,
branded, and attacked as “they that troubleth Israel.”

4. Responding with Silence. Dr. Hasel was loved and greatly admired by different classes of people. But those who sowed doubts concerning him could not understand what there was about him that attracted students and teachers, church members and pastors, church leaders and even little children. To his distractors, Dr. Hasel was egocentric or even politically ambitious. They therefore whispered to his admirers: “Flee from his presence; can't you see that he is exploiting you and manipulating you for his vested interests and ambitions?”[7]

If Dr. Hasel had heard such remarks, I think, he would have responded with silence. For he believed that those who knew him best will one day have the opportunity of giving their own testimony.

What then do those who knew Dr. Hasel say in response to these misrepresentations?

To these, we can only smile and reply: “Did you really know Dr. Hasel? Did you spend time to visit and pray with him? Did you understand what really motivated him in life? Did you make an effort to know who he was, and for what he stood?” If you did, you would know him as we did:

--*We knew him* as a man of integrity: and because of this integrity he would not twist the words nor misrepresent the positions of others--however much their views differed from his.

--*We knew him* as a man of principle and boldness: and because of this boldness he would not wait until his retirement to declare and articulate his true theological views.

--*We knew him* as a model Christian teacher: not only did he possess a deep intellectual and spiritual insight that made him alert and ever ready to analyze and to challenge every departure from Biblical Christianity, he was also able to make complicated theological issues very simple. Even more, he was humble in his professional accomplishments.

--*We knew him* as a Christian gentleman: one whose countenance repelled every form of arrogance, mediocrity and pettiness, and one whose deportment and personal appearance were worthy of emulation.

--*We knew him* as a sympathetic friend: one who was very firm in the discipline of his friends, and yet, extremely sensitive in caring for their needs.

--*We knew him*, above all, as a noble Christian: one who had a love for Christ, a deep respect for Scriptures, a ready commitment to costly discipleship, and a lifelong yearning for the second Advent.
Because *we knew him and what he stood for*, we could not flee from his presence while he was yet alive, and even now in his death, we cannot banish him from our memory, nor discredit his tremendous contribution to the Remnant Church.

In just a few minutes, we shall all file out of this sanctuary to the Rosehill Cemetery where we shall commit the perishable remains of this great man to the ground. We do so, secured in the knowledge that the body that we shall place in the ground will be a seed that would soon germinate (1 Cor 15:42-44; 51-57).

Yes, *"A Mighty Oak Has Fallen!"* But let not those who neither know our Lord, nor His providential leading, think that the departure of Dr. Hasel will deal a fatal blow to the cause of Christ for which he gave his life. For we do know that mighty oaks do not necessarily fall because they are old, tired, or even cut down. Mighty oaks fall in order to give room to many more oaks to grow.[8] Thus, our Heavenly Father has deemed it fit to call His mighty warrior to lay down his sword and shield so as to raise not one Hasel, but many more Hasels in his place. His personal life may now be ended, but what he stood for cannot die.

**THE CHALLENGE BEFORE US**

Today, at this very hour, the torch is being passed on to another generation of Bible-believing Adventist scholars and preachers from all the different regions of the world. To us has been bequeathed a priceless legacy of Adventist faith.

Let us, now, also make a commitment to love Jesus Christ as our Lord, to have a respect for Scriptures as His Word, to stand for Him at whatever cost, and to hasten the second-coming of our Lord.

Let us, now, also make a pledge to pursue the highest form of theological scholarship that will not surrender *"the Truth."*

Let us resolve to cherish a pastoral concern, an evangelistic fervor, and a prophetic daring to speak for God wherever we find ourselves.

Let us join hands and ranks and, today, make a commitment to those who fought alongside Dr. Hasel--the Raoul Dederens, the Mervyn Maxwells, the C. Raymond Holmes, and many others[9]--who are still in our midst. Let us, by the grace of God, assure them that their labors in our behalf will not be in vain, and that we are prepared to hold fast to what is True rather than to what is new.[10]

And with these commitments,
--let us go back, as students and faculty, to our classrooms
--let us go back, as pastors and laypeople, to our churches
--let us go back, as administrators and evangelists, to our offices
--let us all go out of this place, and in unity and in humility *preserve, practice, and proclaim* the
everlasting gospel for which Dr. Gerhard Hasel so faithfully labored (Rev 14:6-12).

**A FINAL WORD TO THE BEREAVED**

And finally, to the bereaved family, permit me to share with you a comforting statement from the writings of one theologian whose works greatly shaped the thoughts of Dr. Hasel. The statement concerns the &quot;Blessed Hope&quot; of the resurrection. Dr. Hasel spoke on this subject of the resurrection, exactly four months ago, at the last International Convention of the Adventist Theological Society (April 14-17, 1994, Southern College, TN). You may recognize the statement I am about to read as coming from the pen of Ellen G. White:[11]

&quot;... All that has perplexed us in the providences of God will in the world to come be made plain. The things hard to be understood will then find explanation. The mysteries of grace will unfold before us. Where our finite minds discovered only confusion and broken promises, we shall see the most perfect and beautiful harmony. We shall know that infinite love ordered the experiences that seemed most trying. As we realize the tender care of Him who makes all things work together for our good, we shall rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

Pain cannot exist in the atmosphere of heaven. In the home of the redeemed there will be no tear, no funeral trains, no badges of mourning. ‘the inhabitant shall not say, I am sick: the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity.’ Isaiah 33:24. One rich tide of happiness will flow and deepen as eternity rolls on.

We are still amidst the shadows and turmoil of earthly activities. Let us consider most earnestly the blessed hereafter. Let our faith pierce through every cloud of darkness and behold Him who died for the sins of the world. He has opened the gates of paradise to all who receive and believe on Him. To them He gives power to become the sons and daughters of God. Let the afflictions which pain us so grievously become instructive lessons, teaching us to press forward toward the mark of the prize of our high calling in Christ. Let us be encouraged by the thought that the Lord is soon to come. Let this hope gladden our hearts. . . .

We are homeward bound. He who loved us so much as to die for us hath builded for us a city. The New Jerusalem is our place of rest. There will be no sadness in the city of God. No wail of sorrow, no dirge of crushed hopes and buried affections, will evermore be heard. Soon the garments of heaviness will be changed for the wedding garment. Soon we shall witness the coronation of our King. Those whose lives have been hidden with Christ, those who on this earth have fought the good fight of faith, will shine forth with the Redeemer's glory in the kingdom of God.

It will not be long till we shall see Him in whom our hopes of eternal life are centered. And in His presence, all the trials and sufferings of this life will be as nothingness. ‘Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and He that shall come will come, and will not tarry’ [Hebrews 10:35-37]. Look up, look up, and let your faith continually increase. Let this faith guide you along the narrow path that leads through the gates of the city of God into the great beyond, the wide, unbounded future.
glory that is for the redeemed. 'Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh.' James 5:7, 8.

This is our hope; this was the hope of Dr. Gerhard F. Hasel; and to this hope I invite you, the members of the bereaved family, to ever cherish. MARANATHA!

Endnotes


2. Ibid., 34.

3. The contention here is not that Dr. Hasel (or any other great leader, for that matter) was infallible or sinless. Such a quality can only be ascribed to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. All others--notwithstanding the excellence of their character and the distinction of their accomplishments--have been sinful human beings who have needed the redeeming grace of Christ. What is being suggested, however, is that in spite of his human limitations and frailties, Dr. Hasel represents those rare finds, aptly described by Ellen G. White, Education (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1903), 57: The greatest want of the world is the want of men--men who will not be bought or sold, men who in their inmost souls are true and honest, men who do not fear to call sin by its right name, men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, men who will stand for the right though heavens fall.

4. Solomon once said: It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart; (Eccl 7:2). Funerals do not only remind us of our own mortalities, but they also force us to reflect seriously upon life and to make a whole-hearted commitment to the things that really count. The object of the tribute was to challenge professing Christians to make a whole-hearted commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord, to respect Holy Scriptures as His trustworthy Word, to stand for Him at whatever cost, and to hasten His second coming through a life of holiness and loving service. This is the cause for which Dr. Hasel faithfully labored.


6. In her commentary upon the events leading to the arrest and untimely death of the apostle Paul, Ellen G. White, Acts of the Apostles (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1911), 417-418, makes an insightful statement that is pertinent to our present discussion: A neglect to appreciate and improve the provisions of divine grace has deprived the church of many a blessing. How often would the Lord have prolonged the work of some faithful minister, had his labors been
appreciated! But if the church permits the enemy of souls to pervert the understanding, so that they misrepresent and misinterpret the words and acts of the servant of Christ; if they allow themselves to stand in his way and hinder his usefulness, the Lord sometimes removes from them the blessing which He gave.

7. Notice again what Ellen White, Acts of the Apostles, 418, has said about situations of this kind: "Satan is constantly working through his agents to dishearten and destroy those whom God has chosen to accomplish a great and good work. They may be ready to sacrifice even life itself for the advancement of the cause of Christ, yet the great deceiver will suggest to their brethren doubts concerning them which, if entertained, would undermine confidence in their integrity of character, and thus cripple their usefulness. Too often he succeeds in bringing sorrow upon them, through their own brethren, such sorrow of heart that God graciously interposes to give His persecuted servants rest. After the hands are folded upon the pulseless breast, when the voice of warning and encouragement is silent, then the obdurate may be aroused to see and prize the blessings they have cast from them. Their death may accomplish that which their life has failed to do."

8. Herein lies the profundity of the Ghanaian proverb, a mighty oak has fallen. The expression is not merely an announcement of the sudden fall of a huge oak, nor even a public declaration of why it was regarded as a stalwart tree among its peers, but more importantly, the proverb is a call upon the smaller oaks (which grew in the shadow of the huge one) not to be unduly shaken by the unexpected loss of the mighty oak. It summons the bereaved oaks to sink their roots a little deeper into the ground, and to stretch forth their branches and leaves a little higher towards the sun, if they are to obtain the resources needed for them to fill the vacuum created by the unanticipated departure of the deceased. Thus understood, this African maxim is the strongest encouragement and motivation that can be given in the face of tragedy.

9. In a personal letter (dated August 19, 1994) addressed to Dr. Raoul Dederen, and Dr. C. Mervyn Maxwell, and copied to Dr. Raymond Holmes (who was unable to be at the funeral), I explained to them why their names were singled out for mention at the funeral. The relevant section of the letter reads: "You may recall that during my tribute to Dr. Hasel yesterday, I made a reference to your names. I did so not only because you are fitting representatives of the `retired' church workers who are still rendering a faithful service to God, but also because I wanted to publicly express my appreciation for what you have meant to me. You have both demonstrated that while Bible-believing scholars may genuinely hold differences of opinion on certain theological issues, it is possible for them, as they diligently seek for Divine illumination on those subjects, to display a gracious Christian spirit toward one another and to stand united on incontrovertible truth."

10. To question the new can expose one's self to the charge of being a prisoner of the pre-scientific past, or to the criticism of lacking the ability to take the present seriously. But there are some dangers in always preferring the new over the old; and the true. Undergirding most interests in new theologies and new moralities is the theory of evolution which teaches that the latest is better than the earliest. While the new may not necessarily be opposed to the true; in many minds the word new has become the operative word for determining what is true. We may all do
well to listen to the caution by Peter Taylor Forsyth: &quot;I am sure no new theology can really be theology, whatever its novelty, unless it express[es] and develop[s] the old faith which made those theologies that are now old the mightiest things of the age when they were new.&quot; Quoted in Kenneth Hamilton, *What's New in Religion?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 6.