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Gerhard Franz Hasel

Life Sketch

1935-1994

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On behalf of the family, I would like to thank all those who are part of honoring my father, Gerhard F. Hasel today. It is a very meaningful experience for me to share this moment with you and I want to thank you, his students, colleagues and friends for planning this session and for the presenters who have taken time to prepare papers for this occasion.

Gerhard Franz Hasel was born in Vienna, Austria on July 27, 1935. His father was a minister of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Within a short time, they moved to Frankfurt, Germany together with his older brother Kurt and sister Lotte. In 1939 when World War II erupted in Europe, his father was drafted into the German army. Convicted with the position that he wanted to save life rather than take life, he threw away his pistol and carried a carved, wooden replica throughout the war into the heart of Russia. God protected the family in many miraculous ways during the following six years. Gerhard's father would be one of seven to survive in his original unit of 1,200 men and in that group only one of three that were never wounded. Those early experiences with God, now documented in the book *A Thousand Shall Fall*, published by his younger sister Susi Hasel Mundy, left a lasting impression on him. He became convicted of two things during these experiences: (1) that God truly existed and (2) that His Word and promises were trustworthy. He wanted more than ever to be faithful to God in all things.

When it came time to enter the Gymnasium or high school, after the war, he longed to learn and apply himself to studies. But in the end, he decided that keeping the Sabbath was more important than attending

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school six days a week. So instead of entering a university-directed education, he began a trade school to become an electrician. He was encouraged by his supervisor to enter an apprenticeship competition and eventually won the district, then citywide, and finally state-level competition in Hessen as an electrician apprentice, which gave him full scholarship studies at the Technical University in Darmstadt, one of the top research institutions in the country. He was destined to become a leading electrical engineer. But it was at this that he felt a strong call to pastoral ministry. Finally, he told the authorities that he would not accept the scholarship and instead enrolled in the small, Marienhohe Seminary run by the denomination in the same city of Darmstadt.

During the summers to finance his education he sold religious books, which in one summer earned him enough money to study abroad for a year. He sailed to New York and headed up to Atlantic Union College where he earned a BA in Theology and German. The following year he was invited to attend the SDA Theological Seminary at Andrews University where he completed an MA in Systematic Theology and a BD degree. It was during his studies in Michigan that he met Hilde Schafer. They were married in 1962. After a year as a minister in Boston, he was invited to Southern Missionary College, now Southern Adventist University, where he taught Greek, theology and Biblical archaeology classes in the Religion department. In 1965 he started commuting to Nashville where he took PhD courses at the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University. In 1970 he completed his PhD in Biblical Studies writing on the topic of the Remnant Motif. He had intended to write a theology of the remnant from Genesis to Revelation, but when he got to Isaiah, his committee informed him that 600 pages would suffice and he needed to bring his study to a close. The published book was later entitled, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah*. Walter Harrelson, James Crenshaw, and Lou Silberman were among his professors at Vanderbilt.

In 1967 he was invited to the SDA Theological seminary where he became director of the PhD/ThD programs, later chair of the Old Testament department and eventually academic Dean from 1981-1988 over a span of 27 years. During that time the seminary experienced strong growth and a diverse group of faculty were hired representing the international nature of the seminary that served the world church.

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Over the course of his scholarship he published or edited twelve books ranging from Old Testament to New Testament theology, two books on hermeneutics and biblical interpretation. His last book, entitled *Speaking in Tongues*, was a careful study of the NT teaching on the gift of tongues and the modern glossolalia phenomenon. He was in the process of writing the NICOT commentary on Amos and Hosea for Eerdmans before his untimely death. His articles ranged broadly from studies in Genesis, Daniel, prophecy, canon, OT cosmology, soteriology in the OT, the sanctuary, covenant, Sabbath, and the concept of the remnant, among others. But he was probably best known in theological circles for his surveys of Old and New Testament theology both in book and article form which often contained subtitles like: Basic Issues in the Current Debate, Retrospect and Prospect, Current Issues and Future Prospects, and the like. In 1978 he was invited to hold a plenary at the Evangelical Theological Society. His topic, “The Future of Biblical Theology” was later published in a volume edited by Kenneth Kantzer. He continued to be actively engaged in ETS and eventually was involved in establishing the Adventist Theological Society for which he served as president from 1990-92 and long-time editor of its journal.

He was a regular contributor to the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* before it was translated from the German, contributing an article in almost every volume. I remember as a high school student typing out those articles in German on our new state-of-the-art Zenith computer with two floppy drives. He had not yet transitioned then to the computer. When he finished his fourth edition of *Old Testament Theology* for Eerdmans he remarked how much simpler it had become than writing it all out long hand and having his secretary later type it up.

Leaving scholarship for a moment, I hope I may take the liberty to describe what it was like living at home with Dad. I will never know how he wrote in his office while one of my sisters practiced piano on the other side of the wall, I was playing my trumpet across from his door, and with the squeaky violin of my youngest sister down the hall. But one thing we all learned from Dad was the importance of hard work, focus, and diligence—especially an attention for details. “Sticktoitiveness” was a word coined and used often in our home. Of course, when we were younger we never really knew what Dad did or what it all meant. When we were young, he was Daddy coming around the corner to surprise us and playing the tickle monster. When we were small he would lay on his

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back on the ground, place us on his feet and lift us high off the ground with our arms outstretched as we balanced in midair until we all fell into a pile laughing. He would love taking us to the beach or out camping for the weekend. We camped a lot. He enjoyed nature. One thing I will always remember will be the long summer trips with the Geoscience Research Institute looking for fossils in Wyoming or hiking to the Petrified Forest at Yellowstone National Park. One of his keen interests was the interface between science and the Bible. In part, it was the hunting of fossils that eventually led to my future interest in biblical archaeology. He was an avid photographer, who during his extensive travels for the church, would always come back with elaborate slide shows that we would watch on Friday evenings as a family. My favorites were always the pictures from ancient Babylon, Egypt, and Jerusalem. It seemed like the Bible came to life with him during our family worships in the evenings and the Word always became the Living Word of God.

Dad loved to surprise us. During one trip when he was in South America on a lecture tour for four weeks, it seemed like an eternity. We spoke once or twice by Ham radio. There were no computers or cell phones then. Somehow he got back early and hid in the closet and when we got home he jumped out and we all screamed and hugged him in surprise.

Dad was an optimist, a forward thinker, and he exhibited an enthusiasm for life lived to its fullest. He was a visionary. He would always say to us, "If you don't make plans for something to happen, it never will." Then he would tell us that this was what his mother always said.

He had the gift of careful discernment. Later as I was older, he would tell me, "Michael, you must always carefully evaluate where an idea comes from and then look where it may lead. Never jump into something without evaluating it carefully from beginning to end. An idea always came from somewhere and has a trajectory that will prove whether it will be worth hanging onto or not. Foremost, test all ideas by the Bible."

I remember sitting in his hermeneutics class at the Seminary in the front row as he described the neo-orthodoxy of Bultmann and his demythologizing of Scripture. I still use those illustrations when I discuss the impact of historical-criticism on the Bible in my classes today. He was a strong defender of the Word of God and its normative role in every aspect of life.

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For my father, the authority of the Bible in its totality was what constituted the Word of God. It needed to be studied by comparing Scripture with Scripture, and allowing the clearer texts to illuminate those that were less clear. Scripture, he believed, was a harmonious revelation of God to humanity. He wrote extensively on the authority of the Bible and on its inspiration and revelation.

In August, 1994, just over 20 years ago, we learned that he had been killed in a car accident in Utah. I had taken him to the airport that morning. He was to fly home the next day to spend time with family. He was attending a church conference of scientists and theologians on Faith and Science where he would present his last paper on the “Days of Creation in Genesis 1: Literal ‘Days’ or Figurative Periods or Epochs of Time?” In a sense, he died defending the integrity and authority of the Word that had been such a central part of his life for so many years. On his tombstone near Lake Chapin, where we enjoyed so many memories, are the words from Isaiah 40:8: “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever.”

Today I believe, if he were here, he would still be a devoted student of the Word of God. He would continue to be engaged in the retrospect and prospect discussions in Biblical Theology for to him that is where life centered. There would be issues he would continue to engage in, and there might also be increased concern at the fragmentation of some of the core biblical principles in theology he so diligently sought to uphold. But then again, he might remind us of the plaque that hung for so many years on the entrance wall of his boyhood home in Frankfurt, Germany, during the war years, where these words of Jesus were etched in wood: “and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

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