

A LIFE WELL LIVED
MY REFLECTIONS ON THE LIFE OF DR. PAUL G. HIEBERT

Terry Steele, Doctoral students of Paul G. Hiebert at TEDS

I was first introduced to Dr. Hiebert's work during my seminary experience. I was amazed at the complexity of his concepts yet the clarity of his explanations and practicality of the concepts he shared. Throughout my education and career, as a student and as an educator, I continually discover new layers to Dr. Hiebert's work. His work on worldview particularly affected me.

Two years ago during a difficult period of time, I discovered Western Seminary was offering a class from Dr. Hiebert on Folk Religions. I was excited and a little intimidated to meet the man whom I considered to be an intellectual giant, yet when I met him for the first time I was amazed at his humble attitude and gentle spirit. Sitting under his teaching was like, as he proposed, taking a long leisurely walk with friends.

My father and I had been wrestling with issues of worldview and core assumptions in our church and approached Dr. Hiebert for his insight in the matter. Over breakfast the three of us talked at length about the Lord's work, core assumptions, and personal struggles. Toward the end of our meal my father explained to Dr. Hiebert about my struggles to find full-time employment in the university system. Very gently this great scholar looked at me with a smile and said, "Come to Trinity and study with me."

A little over a year later I arrived at Trinity and immediately sought out Dr. Hiebert. We sat down for lunch and again began to wrestle with issues of worldview. I was amazed at how he spoke to me as a colleague rather than a student. He once told me that my fellow students at TEDS and I were scholars, not students, "and as you know, scholars have a hard time getting things done on time." He enjoyed the process of learning with us and from us. Here was one of the most brilliant minds I'd ever been exposed to and he was taking notes from me. Many other TEDS students have shared similar stories of how their papers and ideas spurred Dr. Hiebert to study an area he wanted to know more about.

By this time the cancer had been diagnosed. I was amazed at how peaceful he seemed and how inviting he was. At the end of our time he invited my family to his house for dinner. Throughout the semester my wife, two boys under five and I ate with Dr. Hiebert, sharing ideas, stories, pains and even jokes. When my parents came to visit he asked to meet them. I specifically remember Dr. Hiebert sitting in his recliner with my Mennonite mother next to him talking as if they were old friends meeting up after a long absence. She told him that he was very special to me to which he responded that I had become special to him. His students were special to him. He remembered us not just as men and women sitting under him for a period of time. He remembered our names, our families, our passions, and our desires. I was also amazed that when we asked questions that seemed off point or put our foot in our mouths, Dr. Hiebert never made us feel foolish or unworthy. He always was gracious even when misunderstood or taken to task over things he taught. He always had a gentle smile and a twinkle in his eyes. I caught him right before he taught his final class period for a Masters class. He pulled me close and said, "Don't be jealous, Terry. I'm going to teach my last class." I told him I didn't think I'd be jealous considering I had many years of teaching ahead of me. He looked at me with that devious grin and said, "I don't have to get up early anymore or prep for any more classes ever again." Okay, I was a little jealous.

I had the privilege of sitting under him for his final doctoral class. All of us in the packed room knew we were in the presence of someone special. At the end of the class we realized that was it - there would be no more Hiebert classes. He prayed for us and said he was done. It now was our job to carry on.

He was more than an author, missionary, anthropologist, scholar or brilliant man. He was a mentor for so many of us. When tutoring us in the ways of knowledge he would share with us grandfatherly advice and human insights. "A book or paper is never completely done. You just get tired of editing and turn it in."

Even after he moved away from Trinity, I did an independent study with him that he insisted he wanted to continue until he was no longer able, so I spoke to Dr. Hiebert over the phone every week for two months. He poured so many ideas into my mind I felt like I was going to burst every time we spoke. Even when he was obviously uncomfortable and in pain he always told me, "I'm doing fine considering the circumstances." He was always cheerful and when I told him I didn't want to take up too much of his energy by talking too long, he pressed on with our conversation for another hour, never lagging in enthusiasm or energy.

Towards the end when our phone conversations were no longer possible, my wife and I sent a note of encouragement to him. He responded with thanks for the encouragement and an admonition. "No matter what you learn in the academy, never loose contact with the person in the pew."

In that first class I took under Dr. Hiebert he exposed me to the idea of split-level Christianity and the perceived divide between the sacred and the mundane. The reality of his life that was well lived was that Dr. Hiebert never saw this split as being real. He had a God that was a God of the holy and the mundane, science and sacred. He never saw a part of his life from which was excluded God or a part of the world where God did not belong. He lived a transformed life, a life that reflected God.

When I called Dr. Mary Wilder last week to give her the news of Dr. Hiebert's passing, she commented, "That must have been a glorious homecoming." His life was well lived. His impact on our minds has been made, but more importantly is the impact upon our hearts and lives for the glory of the Lord. "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Published in the special issue "A Memoriam of Paul G. Hiebert"
www.globalmissiology.org April 1, 2007