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A Tribute to Ellsworth Kalas

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J. Ellsworth Kalas was born in Sioux City, Iowa, on 14 February 1923—the same year that Henry Clay Morrison began Asbury Theological Seminary. The members of the Kalas household went to church twice weekly, and the family attended church every night during its frequent revival meetings. Father and Mother Kalas had limited formal educations, yet they were readers and faithful Sunday school workers. Ellsworth’s father was intellectually curious enough about national and world events to subscribe to *The Sioux City Tribune*, even though it cost three cents a day and five cents on Sundays. At that time, many workers in the United States received a wage of one dollar a day. Ellsworth said of his parents, “I will never stop marveling at their courage; not the courage of a moment in raw battle or in crisis, but the 24/7 courage to get up every morning . . . struggle to find work, and eat modestly.”

Ellsworth was six years old when the Great Depression began to blanket America. Twenty-five percent of the country’s wage earners, including Ellsworth’s father, lost their jobs. To economize during those difficult days, Ellsworth went barefoot in the summer to lengthen the life of his shoes. To obtain inexpensive housing, the family moved into an apartment, for which water was available only from a faucet across the hall. Two bathrooms—one for men and one for women—accommodated a dozen apartments. Years later, Ellsworth remarked, “Today, some of my friends have walk-in closets bigger than any bedroom I knew in my boyhood. . . . But we had a surprising sense of dignity and self-respect, and we believed that virtue had its own rewards, and we intended to pursue those virtues.” When he was a child, Ellsworth sometimes sat on the front steps and saluted those who passed by with a hearty “Good morning.” Later he mused, “This experience may have prepared me for the long decades of greeting people at church doors on several thousand Sunday mornings.”

Ellsworth said that he was awkward on the elementary school playground, but agile in the classroom. “I didn’t survive even the first cut when I went out for the football and basketball teams,” he said, “but this meant that I gave my full energy to the debate team and the a cappella choir—matters far, far more valuable to me in the years since then.” He eventually memorized most of the hymns of the church, and for the rest of his long life he never needed to open a hymnal for congregational singing.

During Ellsworth’s eleventh year, he came to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Others noticed that he was serious about God and the activities of the church. His family attended the Helping Hand Mission Church, which had started as a rescue mission. He later reflected, “There was nothing glamorous about this church experience, nothing to make me think the ministry was a profession.”

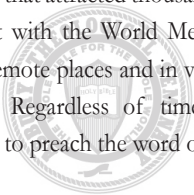
Nonetheless, as a boy he sensed that God was calling him to become a preacher. He bought a five-cent notebook to record sermon illustrations and information gleaned from the preaching he heard. In junior high school, his good grades qualified him to take Latin, which he opted to do. He understood that Latin would give him a better grasp of language and grammar, both of which would make him a better preacher when he grew up.

After his boyhood commitment to Christ, Kalas began to read the entire Bible every year, a practice he continued to follow the rest of his life. He said, “Every day I find something new. . . . The newness is a result of the depth of the material and the quite wonderful way the Holy Spirit adapts it to the changing patterns of my life. . . . All of the . . . books I’ve written . . . are a product of my lifetime of Bible reading.”

When Kalas attended a fiftieth-anniversary class reunion, a former classmate showed him a printed interview that had appeared in an eighth-grade student publication. “My answers were almost unbelievably inane,” he said. “But when the interviewer asked what I hoped to be when I grew up, I answered something like this: ‘I want to be a preacher and write books.’” Before he reached his teen years, he informed his pastor that he would be glad to fill in for him if he ever needed to be away on a Sunday. In his mid-eighties Kalas remarked, “When I recall some of the arrogant things I said in my teens and twenties, I’m astonished that God didn’t judge me a hopeless case and smite me dead.” Nonetheless, in his early teen years, the “boy preacher” began holding revival meetings in neighboring churches.

In 1951, Kalas graduated with honors from the University of Wisconsin with a degree in literature. In 1954, he obtained his Bachelor of Divinity degree from Garrett Theological Seminary. At Garrett, he received the Trustees Award for Scholarship and the [Daniel] Kidder Preaching Prize. He then took further graduate study in American history at the University of Wisconsin and at Harvard University. Dr. Kalas also received honorary degrees from four colleges and universities.

Kalas served Methodist pastorates for thirty-eight years. In Wisconsin, he served churches in Watertown, Green Bay, and Madison. His last pastorate was in Cleveland Heights, Ohio at Church of the Saviour. During his tenure there, he developed a television ministry that attracted thousands of viewers. Next, he served for five years as an evangelist with the World Methodist Council (1988–93). In this ministry, he preached in remote places and in venues where the congregations numbered in the thousands. Regardless of time, place, or circumstance, he considered it an honor and joy to preach the word of God.



Ellsworth Kalas's pulpit presence was impressive. He was tall man with a resonant baritone voice and a winning smile. He possessed a mastery of the English language, an encyclopedic knowledge of Scripture, and the anointing of the Holy Spirit. He preached without notes, and often his messages moved congregations with the effect of a biblical prophet.

Kalas was also a churchman who stayed abreast of denominational developments. His work with the World Methodist Council and with board and committee memberships gave him exposure to the pulse of the church. In 1987, Kalas and several other prominent United Methodist pastors issued a letter of invitation that led forty-eight leading United Methodist members of the clergy to gather in Houston to draft and sign The Houston Declaration, This document called for the church to resist doctrinal drift and to maintain its stated commitment to classical, orthodox Christian doctrine and theology.

Dr. Kalas authored more than forty books, developed lectures for a variety of occasions, and wrote twelve Sunday school quarterlies for the United Methodist Church. He prepared a groundbreaking study, *Christian Believer*, designed to teach Christian theology to lay people. His devotional book *The Grand Sweep; 365 Days from Genesis through Revelation* enriched the lives of many people and led them to read daily from the Bible. His "backside" books on the Bible and its characters reached bestseller status.

In 1993, Dr. Kalas joined Asbury Theological Seminary's faculty as a professor of preaching. He communicated his love of English to his students, and he appraised every word of their sermons, including their sermon titles. He affirmed the good work of his students' written sermons, while making corrections in a way that encouraged them. He emphasized biblical fidelity to his students, and he said, "Beginnings matter, beauty matters, art and poetry matter, history matters."

In 2004, Kalas became director of Asbury Theological Seminary's Beeson International Center. The mission of this center is to form bridges between the Seminary and the global Church. The center focuses on preparing leaders for America and other nations to produce "legacy-quality demonstrations of what God will do through leaders who are convinced their worlds call for biblical transformation."

In 2006, during a time of presidential transition at the Seminary, the school's Board of Trustees asked Dr. Kalas to become the school's interim president. During Kalas's years as a pastor, he had received invitations to be considered for the presidency of several colleges and seminaries. He declined these overtures. However, the invitation to lead Asbury Seminary was different. He recalled, "When Jim Smith [the board chairman] . . . asked me to allow my name to be considered

as the interim leader at Asbury, I knew that I must say yes.” Ellsworth Kalas’s presidential term began on 18 October 2006. He was eighty-four years old.

Kalas had a good understanding of both the church and the academic arena. His integrity, wisdom, and interpersonal skills fitted him for the presidency of this large and growing seminary, with students from more than twenty nations. As a bonus, Ellsworth was one of the best preachers in America. President Kalas’s leadership at the Seminary proved effective in the several areas that needed special attention. At the 2008 spring meeting of the Board of the Seminary, the trustees changed his title from Interim President to President. When Ellsworth retired from the presidency of Asbury Seminary in 2009, he continued to teach homiletics.

When Ellsworth retired, people asked him, “What do you plan to do now?” He replied, “I plan to grow.... God delights in growing things, especially growing people. I’ve learned that we have to be intentional if we want to grow.... The growth I have in mind is focused on God.” In response to questions about retirement, he advised, “Buy a house on Gratitude Street.... The longer you live there the more you will love it. And believe me, you will enjoy your neighbors.... You purchase this property with humility, by acknowledging that you are deeply indebted to both God and people. You confess that you wouldn’t have anything if it weren’t given to you. The important thing is not only to realize this, but to acknowledge it— to say ‘thank you’ as often as you can, to God and to people.”

Having read many of J. Ellsworth Kalas’ writings and enjoyed a long friendship with him, this writer believes that Ellsworth’s life accords with the poetic words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.





Dr. J. Ellsworth Kalas
(Feb. 14, 1923 - Nov. 12, 2015)



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