



## Dr. I. John Hesselink

March 21, 1928 - October 28, 2018

John was a lover of books, music, baseball, teaching ... and pancakes. He had a gift for explaining complex theological issues in a way understandable to almost anyone, making no distinctions in the respect he held for all, thus sharing his love of teaching and knowledge with any who asked. He was also noted for his irenic and ecumenical spirit and discourse. John Hesselink was born in Grand Rapids Michigan on March 21, 1928, to the Reverend Ira Hesselink and Anna Mulder Hesselink. When he was eight, his family moved to Leighton, Iowa, near Pella, where he finished elementary school in a two-room school. He went to high school in Pella, where he lettered in four sports, sang in the choir, was on the debate team and studied Latin - all precursors of his lifelong interests. John's excellence in speaking, debate and poetry reading won him an exclusive award for a summer program at Northwestern University in Chicago with promising young people from all over the U.S., where topics for debate centered on the revolutionary events taking place in China in the mid-1940s, which broadened his world view considerably and greatly influenced him in later years. He went to Central College, in Pella, Iowa (a Reformed Church in America (RCA) college) and majored in philosophy. He continued his extracurricular interests in debate and singing bass in the a cappella choir as well as joining several religious organizations and the "Gospel Team" in which his leadership qualities became evident. His work study grant was becoming head waiter in the dining hall (other than leadership, not a skill he used later in life). His membership in the college's

barbershop quartet ("Gospel Quartet" on Sundays and "Four Flats" the rest of the week) influenced the rest of his life. In his junior year, in need of a pianist, a member of the group called out an open window "Anyone out there play the piano?". This initially angered John. However, a new freshman, Etta Ter Louw, answered affirmatively, and the rest is history. Calls to ministry come in different ways and, for John, his call to missionary service came through a very low-key, non-eloquent recruiter from the Mission Board. She listed the needs which needed to be filled, and was surprised on their first meeting that he had never considered mission work before. On graduation from Central in 1950, he went to New Brunswick Seminary in New Jersey for his first year and, when Etta graduated from Central in 1951, they married and moved to Holland where John completed his seminary work at Western Theological Seminary. Etta had felt the call to mission work since childhood so the decision to go to Japan was easy. They were commissioned the summer of 1953, after John's graduation from Western, and sailed on a freighter with their 9 month old son, I. John, III. The first year and a half of language study in Tokyo were providential in meeting Emil Brunner, the first Professor of Religion appointed to the International Christian University (ICU, the newly-formed post-war university). They formed a strong bond of friendship under unusual circumstances. Dr Brunner's English lecture manuscripts were stolen, but he was told Dad took extensive notes in these lectures previously given (the time lapse of the English-Japanese translation gave John time to take these extensive notes). A late night visit from Dr. Brunner to borrow John's notes resulted in a life-long relationship. After language study and three and a half years of student evangelism, John was accepted for doctoral studies under Karl Barth in Basel, Switzerland, through only a simple recommendation by a German fellow-missionary. His first 6 months were spent living with Dr. Oscar Cullman and his sister in a foreign student facility - where he learned his first German in order to do his graduate studies and final oral exam after only 3 years. The rest of the family (Etta and 3 children) joined John in Switzerland for the last 2 1/2 years. His doctoral thesis was later published as

Calvin's Concept of the Law. A highlight was arranging the historic meeting of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner in 1961 in Basel. This was a relationship strained for more than 30 years by theological differences. The encounter can be found in several publications, often referred to as "The Elephant and the Whale." (Barth opted to be the whale, for they know no boundaries whereas elephants are land-locked!). Several of the 4 photos John took at the time have found their way into publications around the world. The whole family then returned to Japan where John was invited to join the faculty of Tokyo Union Theological Seminary. Here he taught theology, as well as Latin, in Japanese. John's ecumenical contact on the mission field covered the broad spectrum of Protestant denominations and Faith (Independent) Missions, as well as Orthodox and Roman Catholic friendships. John (and family) moved back to the United States where he joined Western Theological Seminary (Holland, MI) as President from 1973 -1985, and then as the A.C. Van Raalte Professor of Systematic Theology until his retirement in 1998. He also served as President of the General Synod of the RCA from 1995-1996. His true love was teaching, and he continued to mentor and work with foreign students, even after retirement. He preached and taught courses in many churches, locally, nationally and internationally and carried on prodigious personal correspondence and contacts with friends, seminaries and churches, including outside the RCA, around the world. His writings of books and articles in numerous publications worldwide, as well as book reviews are innumerable. For all his accomplishments, however, he somewhat remarkably never learned to type, so everything was always in his longhand script. John's life was filled with passion for the many possibilities and opportunities for the engagement with things and people he loved. Priorities were foundational for the way he used his time, energy and gifts. He continued to wrestle theologically with the great mysteries of the faith, but his personal faith resided firmly in the goodness, providence, and love of God for all of creation. He loved the church and the wonderful fellowship found within its boundless

varieties of expression throughout the world. It is impossible to condense 90 years of a life as complex as his was. Highlights would include his 3 periods of post-doctoral studies at the University of Chicago, Oxford University and the Free University Amsterdam; being awarded the title "Honorary Professor" (joining the ranks of Karl Barth) by the oldest theological seminary in Europe in Saraspotak, Hungary. They could not award an honorary doctorate as it is not a university. He also received honorary doctorates from Central College (Pella, IA) and Hope College (Holland, MI). John belonged to the Calvin Translation Society in Japan (co-founder), the National Barth Society (past president), was a member of the Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia (for 9 years), taking him to the Philippines, indonesia, India, Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, China and Korea many times, the Theological Society of America (by invitation), the West Michigan Theological Society and the Dutch Translation Society, among others. His lectures and teaching also took him to South African, Brazil, the Netherlands, Hungary and France. In addition, locally he was a member of the Century Club (past President), many time lecturer at Hope Academy of Senior Professionals (HASP), a faithful supporter of Words of Hope, a 30+ year member of Third Reformed Church's early morning choir, and had a special love of "Sunrise Saints" (a men's fellowship and study group at Third Reformed). He had an unapologetic love of Western Seminary, where he kept his ties with faculty and especially foreign students through his retirement years. He loved and supported the arts and musical events in Holland, and was a devoted enthusiast for Hope College's men's and women's volleyball and basketball teams. And his loyalty to the Detroit Tigers never flagged. When son Greg began the arduous task of organizing John's study, several things became evident. In the thousands of books lining almost every surface of the house, there was scarcely a volume that did not include articles cut out from other publications, marginal notes and added bits of scrap -paper notes everywhere. This included poetry as well as novels, in addition to his vast theological library. Greg termed him a "hoarder of knowledge." Rarely did he

go anywhere without his briefcase filled with "stuff" to pass out to friends and acquaintances. John is survived by the family he loved: Etta, his wife of 67 years; five children and two grandchildren: John III (Nicaragua and Holland, MI), Ann (Del Mar, CA - husband Paul Naour and daughter Katherine Hesselink Hicks), Jud (Martinez, CA), Nathan (Vancouver, BC - wife Serra Hwang and son Braque) and Greg (New York, NY) - all of whom the carry-on his love of knowledge, music and the world at-large. And finally - his love for Jackie's Place and its warm and caring staff, a place where all class distinctions were lost in the wonders of its unexcelled pancakes. John would have added undoubtedly "To God be the Glory!" A memorial service will be 11:00 a.m. Friday, November 30, 2018 at Third Reformed Church, 111 West 13th St. Holland. Interment will be in Graafschap Cemetery. Visitation will be 4-7 p.m. Thursday, November 29 at Langeland-Sterenbergh Funeral Home, 315 E. 16th St. Holland. Memorial contributions may be given to Third Reformed Church 111 West 13th Street Holland MI 49423, Western Theological Seminary 101 E 13th Street Holland MI 49423, Words of Hope 700 Ball Avenue NE Grand Rapids MI 49503-1308, or Theological Book Network 3529 Patterson Ave SE Grand Rapids, MI 49512.

# Tribute Wall



“ *Dr. I. John Hesselink*

August 31, 2022 at 01:26 PM



“ *"My condolences to the family of Dr. Hesselink. It was a privilege to meet him in 1975 when my husband attended Western Theological Seminary. My husband had great respect for him. We can truly celebrate a life well lived to the glory of God!! God's blessings to his family. Hendrika Heeg"*

**Hendrika Heeg** - November 13, 2018 at 12:00 AM



“ *"The way Dr. Hesselink embraced, encouraged, and challenged his students drove me deep into reformed theology, and deep enough to get past it's typical roadblocks to see its transformative beauty. He would let us struggle with hard questions knowing that the result would be students with commitment rather than students with good answers. For this reason, I didn't feel like his "A's" were an academic achievement, but an encouragement to stay on the right path. Thank you, Lord, for the opportunity to be one of his students."*

**DAVID WILLERUP** - November 09, 2018 at 12:00 AM



“ *"Dr. Hesselink met me in Japan when he was president of Western Seminary and I was an RCA short-term missionary considering seminary. John took me to the church where he preached in Japanese, and he kindly provided me with an English translation. Needless to say, I graduated from Western and delighted in the Japanese articles that he'd periodically send my way."*

**Todd Buurstra** - November 08, 2018 at 12:00 AM

AH

“I'm sadden to hear the home call of this great man of God. I first met Professor John in 2003 when I came to Western Seminary for Th. M program in Holland MI. I remembered his friendship with international students. He provided some useful materials for my doctoral degree. His scholarly and spiritual counsel would be greatly missed. Our condolences to mama Etta and family. Apollos & Esther Handan. #10 Emmanuel Gomwalk Street P. O. Box 13126 Lamingo, Jos, Plateau State Nigeria, West Africa. apolloshandan@hotmail.com Phone: +234 803-588-9436.”

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**Apollos Handan** - November 04, 2018 at 12:00 AM

CM

“Ann and family - So sorry to hear about your dad. He was a wonderful person, so supportive to me when I was at Western. Blessings to you, Ann, and your family.”

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**Charles Morris** - November 02, 2018 at 12:00 AM

DO

“Even though a new friend, John had a profound influence on my life and my writing. Just over a year ago John and I had breakfast together. The occasion was a book signing. In that book I had a chapter on Heaven. John and I discussed this topic for most of the morning. I thank God for the insightful thoughts John shared with me. He now has entered into that eternal blessing. God bless you Etta and family! Dan Van Ommen”

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**Dan Van Ommen** - November 01, 2018 at 12:00 AM

JH

“*The Tigers have lost a loyal fan, Jackie's Place has lost their best customer and we all have lost a friend. Our condolences to Etta and family. Jack and Elsa Hyde*”

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**John Douglas and Els Hyde** - November 01, 2018 at 12:00 AM

ND

“*Sorry to hear about his passing, but I am sure that there are people up there waiting for him and putting the coffee on. Nancy Dunham ( for the Dunhams and DeBruins etc. who've known him.*”

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**Nancy J Dunham** - October 31, 2018 at 12:00 AM