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Allen Guenther, the Scholar

Elmer A. Martens

Scholars come in different shapes and sizes. Some may be ivory-tower types, but Allen Guenther is not one of those. In the fall of 1981, he joined the faculty of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, California, where he was my colleague for twenty-four years and from which he received the distinction of Professor Emeritus in 1998. A scholar indeed, Allen is definitely earthed in life, as is the Old Testament, the primary area of his teaching and research.

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in tough times, have filled me and other of his colleagues
with awe.*

TRAINING AND SCHOLARLY GIFTS

Although Allen's training in biblical studies makes him conversant with New Testament studies as well (M.A. from Wheaton), his main focus has been with the Hebrew canon, beginning with his Master of Divinity degree (Gordon Divinity School). He then continued his education through doctoral studies (Ph.D., University of Toronto, 1977). His dissertation addressed Hebrew syntax, particularly the use of the conjunction *waw* (partially corresponding to the English "and") in portions of Jeremiah and Esther. He became convinced that working in the Old Testament required significant preparatory work in language and cultural understanding.

Allen is marked as a scholar by his diligence and meticulous attention to details. One colleague noted how carefully Allen scrutinizes the

Elmer Martens is President Emeritus and Professor Emeritus of Old Testament, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, California.

Hebrew text: “He loves grammar”; he is a “person of precision.” Allen will take anyone interested to his computer to demonstrate his theory of how Hebrew spellings and vocalizations have changed in the course of centuries. Careful grammatical analysis has been foundational to his theological work with Scripture. Those who know him admire his intellect and speak of him as a “competent theologian,” one with a “sharp mind and keen wit.”

TEACHING

The teachers who were most influential in Allen’s life were Dr. David Ewert and Dr. F. C. Peters (both of Mennonite Brethren Bible College, Winnipeg, Manitoba): Ewert for his vast knowledge of the discipline of New Testament studies; Peters for his style and humor. Competence, enthusiasm, and humor are also part of Allen’s instructional legacy.

Alumni agree that it was his signature course, “Introduction to Biblical Studies,” that most energized him and them. It was not that Allen was a teacher who gave easy grades. Quite the opposite. He was known as one of the toughest teachers. Allen set high standards for himself and those he taught. Yet his high expectations had a positive payoff, both for students and in his own scholarship. This is why his colleagues, myself included, would seek his critique of articles being prepared for publication.

RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS

Allen has published work on biblical texts and subjects which range from creation, to Israelite history, to covenant in addition to numerous book reviews. In recent years especially, he has produced journal articles that tackle difficult subjects, such as family and the marriage institution, issues important in the Bible and stressed in Anabaptist-Mennonite theology. When asked which publication especially pleased him, he cited the recent article, “A Typology of Israelite Marriage” (2005), published in the British-based *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*. In it he draws from his educational training in the ancient Near East to clarify social, economic, and religious factors in Israelite culture.

Allen also takes satisfaction, as well he might, in the four hundred-page commentary he wrote on Hosea and Amos in the Believers Church Bible Commentary series (Herald Press, 1998). Any reader will soon be struck by the freshness of the prose. Allen may work with large ideas, but he is not dull or difficult to read. With skillful use of metaphors he brings the reader deep into the biblical text. He knows that he is blessed with writing skills and is thankful for affirmations.

Scholarly reviews of the Hosea/Amos commentary have offered praise such as the following: "Very nice style, elegant in places"; "He writes in a lucid style, and his passion engages the reader in discovering the message of these prophets"; "Guenther makes the text relevant to the modern church and society"; and "My reading was rewarded with fresh insights." A reviewer for the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* noted the "well-rounded hermeneutical process" reflected in the book, and concluded, "Guenther has provided a cogent and engaging commentary."

In addition to his own writing, Allen is also a keen editor. For eight years (1981-1989) he edited *Direction*, the academic journal of Mennonite Brethren in North America. To this publication he also contributed insightful articles, such as, "On Making and Breaking Covenants" (spring 1990). He also edited my volume, *Jeremiah*, in the Believers Church Bible Commentary series (1986).

A DEEPLY SPIRITUAL PERSON

Allen is remembered as one who loves what he is doing, has skill in articulating the message, and integrates theology with compassion. He sees his work as a service to the church, which explains the numerous articles in denominational periodicals—e.g., the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* and the *Christian Leader*—and his contributions to adult Sunday school materials. In these venues he has written on forgiveness, prayer, self-love, repentance, doubt, college life, a series on the MB Confession of Faith, justice, mercy, judgment, the role of women in church leadership, a series on the Ten Commandments, and a series on Job, to give only a partial list.

Allen is a scholar with soul. A faculty member wrote, "Allen has such a close relationship with God that he radiates God's love; when I am with Allen I experience grace, acceptance, love, and faithfulness that Scripture sums up as shalom." Says an alumnus, "Allen doesn't just teach students; he nurtures and pastors them." He is also known for balance: "Allen is both a deep theological thinker and a deeply spiritual person." Another alumnus, giving a tribute on the occasion of an award Allen received, complimented, "As a theologian you have not stripped God of his mystery."

It was at a faculty-student retreat in the Sierra mountains in 1984 when Allen shared with the seminary community the physician's diagnosis that he had the beginnings of Parkinson's disease. Some of us cried on the inside. Resolute and clear-sighted he announced that he would continue as God would enable him, though he foresaw that his role would be more and more diminished. Allen's perseverance, his

faith in God, his transparency in tough times, have filled me and other of his colleagues—indeed, the seminary and wider community—with awe. His body may be afflicted with trembling, but in his person he is fully steady. ✨