

Tribute to Dr. C. Mervyn Maxwell

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The world for me is a diminished place from what it was a week ago due to the passing of my friend and mentor, Dr. C. Mervyn Maxwell. In the lexicon of titles bestowed by one individual upon another there is none higher than “friend.” He was my friend, and I was his.

Of course, it did not start out that way. When first I met Dr. Maxwell, he was one of my seminary professors. But since the first class that I took from him nearly thirty years ago, no other person—with the exception of my own family—has had a larger impact upon my life than did Mervyn Maxwell. I owe him much, and will sorely miss his counsel and friendship.

During the years I was privileged to know Mervyn, first as his student, and then as his friend, to me he was always the embodiment of a genuine Christian. Although I am tempted to say much about him, I will just share five areas where his life’s example impacted mine.

First, Mervyn was a man of prayer. As secretary of our Adventist Heritage Ministry board, he often led us in praying for various projects. For years we prayed for \$100,000. At one board meeting someone commented that we needed much more than that per year if we were to respond to all the openings that God was providing our organization. In his simple, yet direct way, Mervyn reminded us that we shouldn’t complain to God about lack of money since He had been giving us what we had been asking for. Mervyn then challenged us to start praying for more funds. To his mind, if we needed more to accomplish God’s work, then pray for it!

Second, Mervyn’s faith in God and the Remnant Church were unshakeable. Of course he knew that problems exist. From his study of the Bible, the Spirit of prophecy, and Adventist history, he could discern potentially harmful trends prior to most. But those never deterred him from his belief in the prophetic mission and ultimate triumph of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. On the

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contrary, his life and entire energies were directed toward supporting and uplifting our church and its Christ-centered teachings.

I remember once asking Mervyn to be the after-dinner speaker at the end of a New England/Michigan denominational history tour I was leading. We were having our closing banquet in the Andrews University dining facility. Although extremely busy, he accepted. His assignment was to put into their larger context the significance of the various historic sites our group had been visiting. He did a super job, talking about our church's history in the setting of the prophetic mission of Adventism and Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. All present that evening were deeply blessed. But I wondered about our bus driver. She was a young, African-American, single parent mom who had never before even heard of Adventism.

On our way back to the motel afterward, our driver couldn't stop talking about what she had heard. She said she "could have listened to that man talk all evening!" The next morning she was still talking about Mervyn's presentation. She told us she had phoned her mother in Detroit to share with her all that she had heard.

Mervyn had a unique gift to touch lives. His own belief in Adventism and its teachings was so strong it was contagious. When others were either throwing out our doctrines or becoming disillusioned and migrating off into little groups, Mervyn's consistent course was a powerful example to many, including me.

Third, Mervyn also deeply loved his family and friends. Almost without fail during our conversations, Mervyn would make some comment about his wife, Pauline, that let me know how special she was to him. I'd like to quote from a letter he wrote in early 1995 to the members of the Adventist Heritage Ministry Board of Trustees. After thanking us for our prayers on his behalf during a time when he was critically ill, he closed by saying, "The pain is beginning to lessen at last and hope is springing that I may be reasonably normal in a few more weeks. Pauline has been a super wife. I mean, even if his back is killing him, no husband deserves to have a wife act as though it were a *privilege* to take off his shoes and socks for him! Or is this the sort of thing God had in mind when He invented love?" (Letter to AHM Board members, March 22, 1995).

Mervyn also deeply loved Stanley, and with a father's justifiable pride exulted in his son's successes. Many were the times that Mervyn shared some anecdote about what Stanley was doing.

Beyond his immediate family, Mervyn also highly prized his friends. Among my most cherished possessions are notes and letters from him, encouraging me and telling me how much our friendship meant. For me, the ultimate example occurred when he tried to surprise me by attending my ordination to the ministry. That he and Pauline would travel one-third of the way across the United States just to be with me on that special occasion spoke volumes. From conversations I have had with others of his friends, I know he related similarly

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to them. By both word and example, Mervyn constantly reminded me of the importance of family and friends, no matter how busy one becomes.

Fourth, Mervyn was continually learning. I never ceased to be amazed at the scope of his interests. Although he was recognized as one of the Adventism's premier church historians, he always wanted to learn more, including from his students and former students. But not just learning, he also enjoyed sharing new discoveries. A number of times he shared with me items pertaining to Adventist history that either he or one of his students had come across. That was something else I admired about Mervyn: not only was he constantly looking for new information to share, he also was generous in crediting others with their finds. His willingness to be open rather than exclusive with new information contrasted sharply with some other researchers with whom I have dealt.

Fifth, even though I could say much more about Mervyn's example, I want to share just one last point. It was the way he handled pain, trials, and disappointments in life. Although often in excruciating pain during recent years due to his illnesses, never once did he express to me so much as a single word of complaint about what was happening to him. Even during my last visit with Mervyn a few weeks ago when he was facing the prospect of undergoing chemotherapy, there were no expressions of anger toward God or rancor over what he was going through. In his typical candor, Mervyn did comment that it is easier to say all the "right" things to others who are facing death than to face up to that possibility yourself. But beyond saying that if his treatments did not work he would feel sorry for those he left behind, there was no bitterness or self-pity, but only expressions of total trust and confidence in his God.

To me, Mervyn was a powerful example of one who lived a consistent, trusting Christian life. For having witnessed that, I am a better person.

As everyone here knows, Mervyn was the consummate story-teller. For that, too, our church is diminished with his passing. Likewise, anyone who was ever present when Mervyn led a group in singing early Adventist hymns was in for an unforgettable spiritual experience. In my mind's ear I can still hear him lining out the old hymn,

Let others seek a home below,
We'll be gathered home;
Which flames devour or waves o'er flow,
We'll be gathered home.

We'll work till Jesus comes,
We'll work till Jesus comes,
We'll work till Jesus comes,
And we'll be gathered home.

Mervyn wore many hats with great ease: husband, father, grandfather, pastor, teacher, student, historian, scholar, theologian, friend, counselor, speaker, story-teller, author, hymn writer, brother, uncle, editor, defender of the faith,

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administrator, mover and shaker, and doubtless many more. Indeed, he was always a busy person—a man with a mission.

As the old hymn says, Mervyn had fervently hoped to be among those still found working when Jesus returns. Obviously, God had a different plan. Although all of us who loved and respected Mervyn will miss him terribly, we know that one day soon—on the great resurrection morning—we shall meet him again when all together “we’ll be gathered home.”

Until then, sleep, my friend; I’ll see you in the morning.

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