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“I Need to Finish My Work”: Tribute to Dr. C. Mervyn Maxwell¹

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Exactly a week ago today, I arrived here in Berrien Springs, MI (from Ann Arbor), in response to an urgent message Dr. Maxwell had left on my answering machine. The message said: “Hello, Samuel Pipim. This is Mervyn Maxwell, encouraging you to get me your article and diskette as soon as possible. *I need to finish my work.*”

The specific work he wanted to finish was the editing of the next issue of *Adventists Affirm*. But I want to believe he was also speaking about his larger work for the Lord—a work of teaching, writing, singing, preaching, Christian friendship, and kindness—for which he is known around the world.

We’ve gathered here this afternoon because our lives have been impacted by a man who believed God had a work for him to do, who did that work faithfully, who did it with a sense of urgency, and who finished that work. We shall dearly miss his wise counsel, prayers, and sense of humor.

My tribute this afternoon will touch on some of these aspects, especially Dr. Maxwell’s sense of humor.

Worst Grade in Seminary. I took only one class from him while studying at the Seminary. Interestingly, the worst grade I ever received while at the Seminary came from the hands of Dr. Maxwell. I really enjoyed his lectures. Why? He believed what he was teaching; he made it very simple to grasp; he taught it with a sense of urgency; and often, while teaching, he would lead us in singing hymns.

One day, however, in the course of his lectures, I found an issue on which I disagreed with him. After class, I went to see him and, after some preliminary

¹ Presented at Dr. Maxwell’s funeral, Pioneer Memorial Church, Andrews University, 26 July 1999.

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discussion, I offered to write a paper presenting an alternative theological position.

I thought I did a good job; but he was not convinced by my well-reasoned paper. He explained: "Any time a student attempts to disagree with his teacher, the student must make sure he does his homework well."

I was caught off-guard by his rather direct answer. But I was impressed by his candor. In the years that followed, I developed a profound respect for him as a scholar who was not afraid to state where he stood on issues. By the way, I'm still doing that particular homework. Too bad he did not live to see my final paper.

Despite our disagreement, I've learned from him that it is possible to hold different opinions and yet be very close friends. Though he gave me a disappointing grade, I can truthfully say that Dr. Maxwell became one of my theological mentors, counselors, and best critics.

Counsels on Writing. I got to know him intimately during his work as editor of *Adventists Affirm* and associate editor of the *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*. He edited a number of my articles and some of my book manuscripts.

Some time ago I mentioned to him that there are "inherited and cultivated tendencies" to writing. I felt the Maxwell family had a special gene for good writing. Since I was not born that way, could he help me cultivate how to write well?

Here is a summary of his counsels on how to write:

1. Say the most important things first; and don't put them in your footnotes.
2. Be sure you've done your homework well by finding out everything the Bible has to say on the subject. Don't ignore Ellen G. White's insights on the issue. If the Bible writers and Ellen White have not explicitly addressed a subject, and if you cannot find clear examples in the Bible or during the lifetime of Ellen White, you will be wiser not to recommend the teaching or practice.
3. Don't just make scriptural references; many readers do not look up references. If you consider a Bible reference to be very important, quote it in the body of your text!
4. Keep your sentences short. And you shouldn't have more than three sentences in your paragraphs. (And with a characteristic sense of humor, he added: "Long paragraphs and footnotes are for Germans. *Good* Englishmen, and those trained in the English tradition, prefer precision and brevity.")
5. Present your biblical position forcefully and persuasively.
6. Don't be surprised if people take offense at truth (it has always been the case).
7. When you are hated, called names, or attacked for upholding truth and combating error, handle it with cheer and Christian grace. Remember that bitterness has no place in God's work. It will keep us from the kingdom." He pointed

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me to: 1) the example of Jesus in praying for those who were nailing him to the cross; 2) the verse “All things work together for good to them that love the Lord” (Rom 8:28), and the story of Joseph; 3) a contrast between Edson White and F. E. Belden (the song writer in early SDA history)—though both faced injustice and misrepresentation, Edson consciously chose not to be bitter, while Belden was a bitter man.

Generosity. Dr. Maxwell was a very generous man. A few years ago, I was going to teach at one of our African institutions where Dr. Maxwell had visited earlier. Shortly before I left, some of the students from this school had written to me, urging me to purchase for them copies of Dr. Maxwell’s book on SDA history. They explained that because of their financial situation, they could not afford to purchase it, and thus, their request was a plea for me to do something about their urgent need. Unable to afford it myself, I decided to pass the problem on to Dr. Maxwell.

I went to his house one evening with my request. As he had always insisted in my writing, I made sure my question was one sentence long and that it contained every relevant bit of information about the request (what book I needed, for whom the books were being requested, where they were, and why they needed it).

I asked: “Dr. Maxwell, would you consider donating some copies of your book *Tell It To the World* to nine very poor students in Africa who need your book, but cannot afford to pay for it?”

He responded to my request with a rather puzzling question: “Give me another very good reason why I should give your African students a book on SDA history.”

Not knowing what else to say, I replied: “Dr. Maxwell, the title of your book is *Tell It To the World*, not *Sell It To the World*.”

I got ten copies of the book—one extra one for myself!

Vision for Young People. When last year I was invited by the Michigan Conference to direct the newly created department to reach out to students in secular universities and colleges, I sought his counsel on what approach or philosophy to adopt:

He responded: “You already know our church is not just another Christian denomination, and our message and mission are different from all others. For these reasons, the methods we employ to reach young people should be different. My counsel to you is this: keep things simple; and don’t be carried away by every new fad.”

He then spoke to me at some length about his pain in seeing our young people being offered a bland brand of Adventism. He expressed a desire to see the restoration of the spirit of the “missionary volunteers.” And when I was about to leave, and just before he prayed for me, he read to me this statement of Ellen G. White:

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Your success is in your simplicity. As soon as you depart from this and fashion your testimony to meet the minds of any, your power is gone. (*Testimonies for the Church*, 2:608)

Walking History. Dr. Maxwell was a walking encyclopaedia. In fact, he seemed to know where one could find some rare sources in the library—sources that even the computer did not know about.

About two weeks ago, when Dr. Maxwell started to bleed on the tongue, I went to visit. He mentioned to me how he now could eat only baby food.

I responded: "That's good news. It means you are not far from the kingdom. For the Bible says, we must become like babies if we are to make it to heaven."

"In that case, I will have to start crawling, too," he added.

"I'm not sure about that one," I rebutted.

"Well, it will interest you to know that in early Adventism, some fanatical groups took Jesus' statement so literally that some of them literally crawled—in order to be like little children!"

Dr. Maxwell continued by giving me an insightful historical lecture on fanaticism, drawing parallels to some of the tendencies we are witnessing in other churches ("laughing in the spirit," etc.) and in our own church.

Optimism. Last Tuesday, I visited him at the hospital, in the company of his wife Pauline. He was in good spirits; there was no indication he would die the following day. In fact, when he saw me, he asked: "Did you bring the manuscript?"

"Yes, but how are you doing?" I replied, trying to feel his pulse before engaging in some jokes.

"You can tell I'm OK," he stated.

Convinced that he was indeed quite well, I said, "Really, Dr. Maxwell, you scared us to death yesterday."

"I know. Even my Pauline [his wife] was scared to death. But I wasn't scared."

"But why did you treat your friends this way. You didn't you give us advance notice. That is not the best way to die. In my African village, if a person decides to die, he invites all his best friends around his death bed, gives them some good advice, discloses his will, blesses them, then dies. You didn't do any of these, Dr. Maxwell."

"That's not a biblical way to die," he responded.

I mentioned that it was, pointing him to the last four chapters of Deuteronomy—recording the last acts and words of Moses.

"Oh, I see," he replied. "So you really want to know why I didn't invite all my friends to watch me die?"

He explained with a smile: "*You see, I do have many other friends here at the hospital, and I needed to see them urgently. But the only way I could be brought down here in time to see my friends was by an ambulance!*"

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Apparently Dr. Maxwell believed he had to finish his work with his friends as well. (Indeed, testimonies from one of the nurses who attended him indicate the profound impact Dr. Maxwell had on her life).

Another Mighty Oak. In the words of a Ghanaian-African proverb, we can truly say, *a mighty oak has fallen*. This proverb is not merely an announcement of the sudden fall of a huge oak, nor even a public declaration of why it was regarded as a stalwart tree among its peers. More importantly, the proverb is a call upon the smaller oaks (which grew in the shadow of the huge one) not to be unduly shaken by the unexpected loss of the mighty oak. It summons the bereaved oaks to sink their roots a little deeper into the ground, and to stretch forth their branches and leaves a little higher towards the sun. It encourages them to reach up and down for the resources needed for them to fill the opening created by the unanticipated departure of the deceased. Thus understood, this African maxim is the strongest encouragement and motivation that can be given in the face of tragedy.

Dr. Maxwell was a mighty oak—we shall lose his physical presence and counsels. Like all mighty oaks, this oak did not fall because it was old, tired, or even cut down. In His divine providence, God allows mighty oaks to fall that He might raise many more oaks to fill their place.

The best tribute we can pay to Dr. Maxwell is when we allow the Lord to make us smaller oaks do what the mighty oak used to do.

Honoring Dr. Maxwell's Memory. Ellen G. White explains to us how we can best honor the memory of mighty oaks that have fallen. The following statement, which was made in the context of her husband's death, is a fitting message not only for Mrs. Pauline Maxwell and other members of the bereaved family, but to all of us who loved and appreciated the ministry of Dr. Maxwell.

The best way in which I and my children can honor the memory of him who has fallen, is to take the work where he left it, and in the strength of Jesus carry it forward to completion. We will be thankful for the years of usefulness that were granted to him; and for his sake, and for Christ's sake, we will learn from his death a lesson which we shall never forget. We will let this bereavement make us more kind and gentle, more forbearing, patient, and thoughtful toward the living. . . . Some who have stood in the forefront of the battle, zealously resisting incoming evil, fall at the post of duty; the living gaze sorrowfully at the fallen heroes, but there is no time to cease work. They must close up the ranks; seize the banner from the hand palsied by death, and with renewed energy vindicate the truth and the honor of Christ." (Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 1:111-112)

May the Lord help us to honor Dr. Maxwell in this way.

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masi, Ghana, where he later worked as a research and teaching assistant. After accepting the call to the gospel ministry, he served the Central Ghana Conference as its Coordinator of Campus Ministries. His doctoral degree was in systematic theology (Andrews University). He has also taught courses in theology and ethics at different campuses in the USA and around the world. Best known for his book Receiving the Word and his sermon series on The Return of Elijah, he speaks and preaches extensively at camp meetings, ministerial conferences, churches, revival retreats, and schools. He has recently completed a new series called Faithful Unto Death (ACM.). pipim@compuserve.com