Journal of the Adventist Theological Society, 11/1-2 (2000): 2–10. Article copyright © 2000 by Jerry Moon.

C. Mervyn Maxwell: An Academic Life Sketch

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C. Mervyn Maxwell's intellectual life and academic contributions, no less than his personal life, exemplified the original denotation of conservative: "having the power or tendency to conserve, to keep from loss, decay, waste, or injury." Maxwell found his lifework, not in theological innovation, but in preserving and articulating the time-honored truths of the past, especially those of the early Seventh-day Adventists. This article will first offer a brief sketch of Maxwell's academic career as a framework for subsequent consideration of his major publications and theological emphases.

Academic Career

C. Mervyn Maxwell (1925-1999) graduated from Mountain View Union Academy, Mountain View, California, and enrolled in Pacific Union College in 1942.¹ His vocational dream at that time was to be an academy science teacher, but he was already feeling some conviction of a call to the ministry. He later recalled his choice of majors: theology "to satisfy my conscience," science "to satisfy myself," and "pre-med to satisfy mother."² Eventually theology won out, and after graduation in 1946 (and marriage to Pauline Weitz in 1947), he spent four years in pastoral ministry in northern California. Upon ordination in 1950, he attended the SDA Theological Seminary in Washington, DC. During that year he produced two early pieces of academic writing, a term paper on "Divine Providence and Predestination," and a thesis on the historical backgrounds of

¹[Biographical Information (form)], C[Cyril] Mervyn Maxwell, typescript, 1987, Center for Adventist Research (CAR), Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

² C. Mervyn Maxwell, "Beside Still Waters," in *God's Hand in My Life*, comp. Lawrence T. Geraty (Nashville: Southern Publishing, 1977), 49.

1260-day period of apocalyptic prophecy.³ Receiving the M.A. in 1951, he returned to southeastern California for another five years of pastoral and evangelistic ministry.

In 1956 he began class work in New Testament and early church history for a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. From 1959 to 1968 he taught religion at Union College, Lincoln, Nebraska, defending his dissertation on "Chrysostom's Homilies Against the Jews: An English Translation," in 1966.⁴ It would be romantic to speculate that his interest in the early church Fathers had something to do with his first name, Cyril, but the factual explanation is that the topic reflected his interest in the history and theology of the change of the Sabbath. Two years after the completion of the doctorate Maxwell accepted an appointment to chair the church history department at the SDA Theological Seminary, now at Andrews University, a position he held until his retirement in 1988. As chair of the church history department he was directly involved in launching Adventist Studies, a new area of concentration in the Seminary Ph.D. program, in 1986, as well as teaching classes in church history and historical theology.

Publications

Books. A brief survey of Maxwell's publications reveals that he had diverse and wide-ranging interests. His fascination with the natural sciences, especially biology and astronomy, revealed itself in his first published book, "Man, What a God!" This inspirational work reveled in the glory of God as reflected in the vastness of the universe, the intricate ordering of life forms, and the incredible mathematical odds against their occurrence by chance.⁵ A second popular book was *Look at It This Way*, compiled from four years of authoring a monthly question and answer column for youth.⁶

But academic controversies were brewing at the seminary in the 1970s; one involved different views on the question of the possibility of human character perfection. Edward Heppenstall vigorously objected to M. L. Andreasen's concepts, which Maxwell, with some minor caveats, accepted. Hans K. La Rondelle had recently done a dissertation on the topic,⁷ and Herbert Douglass, an associate editor of the *Adventist Review*, had also written on the topic. Someone

³ C. Mervyn Maxwell, "Divine Providence and Predestination" (Term paper, SDA Theological Seminary, 1951), 27 pp.; idem, "An Exegetical and Historical Examination of the Beginning of the 1260 Days of Prophecy with Special Attention Given to A.D. 538 and 1798 as Initial and Terminal Dates" (Thesis, SDA Theological Seminary, 1951).

⁴ Maxwell, "Chrysostom's Homilies Against the Jews: An English Translation" (PhD. diss., University of Chicago, 1966).

⁵ Maxwell, Man, What a God! (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1970).

⁶ Maxwell, *Look at It This Way*, "Questions and Answers Selected from Mervyn Maxwell's Column in *Signs of the Times* Magazine" (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1972).

⁷ Hans K La Rondelle, *Perfection and Perfectionism: A Dogmatic-Ethical Study of Biblical Perfection and Phenomenal Perfectionism* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews UP, 1971), published version of a Th.D. diss., Free University of Amsterdam.

at Southern Publishing conceived the idea of a symposium showcasing four perspectives under the title *Perfection: The Impossible Possibility*.⁸ Maxwell's section will be discussed further below.

His first seventeen years of teaching SDA church history he distilled in 1976 as *Tell It to the World: The Story of Seventh-day Adventists.* The book blended theological developments with historical narratives, reflecting the storytelling flavor of his classroom presentations. Very popular, the book has gone through several editions in English and been translated into German, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. Four years later Maxwell authored another version of SDA church history, this one aimed at a younger readership. *Moving Out* was profusely illustrated as a textbook for twelfth-grade religion classes.⁹

About the time *Tell It to the World* appeared, Pacific Press was planning a new commentary on Daniel and Revelation, and Maxwell accepted the task. The two volumes (318 pages on Daniel and 573 pages on Revelation) were eventually published as *God Cares*, and translated into several languages, including Chinese, German, Korean, Portuguese, and Spanish. Three thousand copies of volume 1, shipped into Communist China, were confiscated at the border and never seen again.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the church was feeling the tremors of an impending theological earthquake, and even before the appearance of *God Cares*, vol. 1, an excerpt was published under the title, *God and His Sanctuary*,¹¹ an early response to the sanctuary debates of the eighties. Also in the eighties, Maxwell contributed significant chapters, "Sanctuary and Atonement in SDA Theology: An Historical Survey," and "The Investigative Judgment: Its Early Development," to Biblical Research Institute volumes.¹² Maxwell's final book-length publication on

⁸ Herbert E Douglass, Edward Heppenstall, Hans K. La Rondelle, and C. Mervyn Maxwell, *Perfection: The Impossible Possibility* (Nashville: Southern Pub., 1975).

⁹ Maxwell, *Tell It to the World: The Story of Seventh-day Adventists* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1976); rev ed., 1977; 2d rev. ed, 1982; Portuguese: *Historio do Adventismo*, trans. G. Brito (Santo Andre, Brazil: Casa Publicadora Brasileira, 1982); Spanish: *Dilo al Mundo* (Pacific Press, 1990); German, *Sagt es der ganzen Welt* (1997); Korean, and Russian. [C. Mervyn Maxwell], *Moving Out: Breakthrough with God's Church*, unit 4 [12th grade], ed. Joe Engelkemier (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1980).

¹⁰ Maxwell, *God Cares: The Message of Daniel for You and Your Family* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1981); idem, *God Cares: The Message of Revelation for You and Your Family* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1985). Translation information and the anecdote about the Chinese edition were provided by Stanley M. Maxwell, interview with author, September 28, 2000.

¹¹ Maxwell, God and His Sanctuary: What Daniel Can Tell Us about 1844, the Cleansing of the Sanctuary, and What Jesus Is Now Doing in the Heavenly Sanctuary (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1980).

¹² "Sanctuary and Atonement in SDA Theology: An Historical Survey," and "The Investigative Judgment: Its Early Development," chapters XXIII and XIV in *The Sanctuary and the Atonement: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Studies,* ed. Arnold V. Wallenkampf and W. Richard Lesher (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1981), 516-544, 545-581. "The Investigative Judgment: Its Early Development" was adapted, with the addition of an Editorial Synopsis, in *Doctrine of the*

the sanctuary was *Magnificent Disappointment: What Really Happened in 1844* and Its Meaning for Today.¹³ He also wrote a chapter on the early development of Adventist Sabbath theology for *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, edited by his church history department colleague, Kenneth A. Strand.¹⁴

Periodical Articles. After the completion of his dissertation, Maxwell kept up a steady stream of articles that continued literally until the day of his death. A partial listing includes about 200 articles: 18 in *Signs of the Times* (plus 60 appearances of a monthly column for youth, 1969-73), 8 in *Liberty* (plus 48 question-and-answer columns, 1966-1973), 26 in *Adventists Affirm*, 6 in the *Lake Union Herald*, 5 in the *Adventist Review*, 5 in the *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 4 in *These Times*, 3 in *Ministry*, 2 in the *Journal of Adventist Education*, 3 in the *Australasian Record*, and some reprints elsewhere.¹⁵ He also authored scholarly book reviews.¹⁶

Other published and unpublished works. In addition to published books, chapters, and articles, the Center for Adventist Research at Andrews University holds a variety of unpublished materials, including class handouts and course anthologies, occasional papers, speeches, and sermons. These show the priority Maxwell placed on teaching; the volume of his class handouts, syllabi, and anthologies over the years at least approximates the volume of his published writings.

Academic Interests and Theological Emphases

From the written products of Maxwell's forty years of college and university teaching, one can note at least eight particular categories of interest: Science and religion, church history, interpretation of Daniel and Revelation, religious liberty, perfection and perfectionism, doctrine of the sanctuary, and contemporary issues in Adventism.

Science and religion. Maxwell's lifelong fascination with science has been noted above. Among his emphases were the beauty of nature as a witness to the magnificence of God, creation vs. evolution, and the ongoing advances in sci-

Sanctuary: A Historical Survey, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1989).

¹³ Maxwell, *Magnificent Disappointment: What Really Happened in 1844 and Its Meaning for Today* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1994; reprint Berrien Springs, MI: Stanley M Maxwell, 2000). For information about reprint editions, see <www.maxwellsgiftsandbooks.com>.

¹⁴Maxwell, "Joseph Bates and Seventh-day Adventist Theology," in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, ed Kenneth A. Strand (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 352–362.

¹⁵ Lynn Eisele compiled a partial listing of some 65 articles in SDA publications through 1996, specifically excluding articles for children and youth ("C. Mervyn Maxwell–Thematic Contributions to the Doctrine of the Sanctuary in the SDA Church" [term paper, Andrews University, 1977], 52–55). Extending the period to the present, I found some fifteen more, plus the columns for *Liberty* and *Signs of the Times*.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Maxwell, review of *Saints and Sinners: Men and Ideas in the Early Church,* by Kurt Aland, *Church History* 41 (1972): 110; Maxwell, review of *Movement of Destiny,* by LeRoy E. Froom, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 10 (1972): 119-122.

ence and technology.¹⁷ He was an avid reader of *Scientific American*,¹⁸ and his sermons and publications often included illustrations drawn from science. He loved to work on computer and was one of the first in the seminary to acquire and use page-making and desktop-publishing software.

Church History. Within his academic discipline, some of the themes Maxwell found especially absorbing included the relation between prophecy and history, the movements of apostasy and Reformation, and the history of Sabbath and Sunday. While most of his published writings were in Adventist journals and magazines, he read widely in scholarly literature related to his field.¹⁹ He taught seminary courses in Early Church History, History of Sabbath and Sunday, Development of Prophetic Interpretation, History of the SDA Church, Development of SDA Theology, and others offered on an occasional basis. In these courses, church history blended with historical theology and often overlapped a third area, the subject of Maxwell's most voluminous writings—the interpretation of Daniel and Revelation.

Interpretation of Daniel and Revelation. The two-volume *God Cares* amounted to almost 900 pages, but many of his other writings touched on aspects of Daniel and Revelation. His M.A. thesis investigated the 1260 days/42 months/3 1/2 years of Dan 7 and Rev 11-13. All the courses mentioned in the previous paragraph contained sections directly involved in the interpretation of these two apocalyptic books.

Religious Liberty. All the above—science and religion, church history, and Daniel and Revelation—have interfaces within the context of religious liberty, so it is not surprising that religious liberty was another of Maxwell's major interests. His 56 articles and columns in *Liberty* have already been noted. For many years he subscribed to and read the *Journal of Church and State* from Baylor University—no doubt a significant source of information for his column.

Perfection and Perfectionism. Maxwell's most comprehensive writing on this topic was a seven-chapter section in *Perfection: The Impossible Possibility*,²⁰ but the theme was a factor in many of his other writings and sermons. Autobiographically, Maxwell expressed a lifelong desire to be "like Jesus" in character. He defined "character perfection" very simply as "the outliving in everyday life of Christ's character, of the loveliness of Jesus."²¹ This was so thematic in his personal life that at his funeral his *Adventist Affirm* colleagues

¹⁷ All these themes are reflected in his first book, Man, What a God!

¹⁸ He subscribed from 1963 to his death; Pauline Maxwell noted that he was a reader of *Scientific American* from college days, but not until 1963 did he feel he could afford the cost of a subscription.

¹⁹ Church History, American Historical Review, Michigan History, Harvard Theological Review, and Journal of Biblical Literature were among the journals he subscribed to.

²⁰ C. Mervyn Maxwell, "Ready for His Appearing," section 4 in *Perfection: The Impossible Possibility*, by Herbert E. Douglass, Edward Heppenstall, Hans K. La Rondelle, and C. Mervyn Maxwell (Nashville: Southern Pub., 1975), 137-200.

²¹ Perfection, 141.

distributed, as a memorial, an eight-page excerpt from *Magnificent Disappoint-ment*, the chapter titled "1844 and Being Like Jesus."²² He strongly disavowed belief in "absolute perfection," as if the sanctified Christian would become, in this life, infallible in judgment or free from physical and mental infirmities. Neither did he perceive perfection as a prerequisite to salvation and hence a threat to assurance. Rather, he saw the biblical call to perfection as "alive with the promise of victory"²³—God's assurance to the believer of sufficient grace to become like Jesus in character. To the end of his life he marveled that any lover of Jesus could object to the promise of becoming like Him. Closely connected with Maxwell's exposition of perfection in the context of Adventist doctrinal development was the doctrine of the sanctuary.

Doctrine of the Sanctuary. Interestingly, Maxwell's absorption in the sanctuary doctrine did not begin until he came to the Seminary in 1968. In one of the first SDA history classes he taught there, a student "on the back row called out, 'What does the sanctuary have to do with SDA history?" Until then, Maxwell recollected, he had believed the sanctuary, but considered the 2300 days a rather tedious calculation and was perfectly content to leave the teaching of it to his colleagues. But with that student's question, Maxwell realized that without a particular understanding of the sanctuary, there would have been no SDA history, and from then on his interest in the sanctuary motivated a series of significant publications, as noted above. From these publications, and from an interview with Maxwell conducted by Lynn Eisele, several salient themes emerge.²⁴

1. One of Maxwell's foundational emphases in any class dealing with the sanctuary doctrine was his passionate exposition of the historical and theological fact that the "Adventist doctrine of the pre-advent investigative judgment is not based on an isolated proof text but was developed from a large body of interrelated data located in both the Old and New Testaments"—and he listed some twenty texts and biblical passages to prove his point.²⁵

2. Another conviction he advocated strongly and convincingly was that the sanctuary doctrine (in connection with the time prophecy of Dan 8:14) is the explicit biblical basis for SDA identity.²⁶

3. Also close to the top of his sanctuary priorities was the confidence that the sanctuary underlines the perpetuity of the Sabbath. Revelation 11:19 men-

²² Magnificent Disappointment, 151–158.

²³ Perfection, 141.

²⁴ Evelyn (Lynn) Eisele, "Interview with Dr C. Mervyn Maxwell," audio cassette, 1977; produced in conjunction with "C. Mervyn Maxwell–Thematic Contributions to the Doctrine of the Sanctuary in the SDA Church," (term paper, Andrews University, 1977), 31–33.

²⁵ Maxwell, *Magnificent Disappointment*, 84; see 81–85 This concept is also expounded in "The Investigative Judgment: Its Early Development," in *The Sanctuary and the Atonement: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Studies*, 545–547, and in "The Investigative Judgment: Its Early Development," in *Doctrine of the Sanctuary: A Historical Survey*, 120–123.

²⁶ Eisele, "Interview"; cf. Maxwell, Magnificent Disappointment, 5.

tions the temple of God in heaven, and specifically highlights the ark of the covenant, which contained the Ten Commandments, showing their relevance to the end-time. In Ellen White's *Great Controversy*, she follows up her chapter on the sanctuary with two chapters on the Sabbath, *before* she presents the Investigative Judgment, thus showing the prominence she placed on the connection between the sanctuary and the Sabbath.²⁷

4. Maxwell also connected the sanctuary with character perfection. He argued that one of the "standard features of Sabbatarian Adventism," was the concept first articulated by O. R. L. Crosier, in 1846, that there are two sanctuaries to be cleansed—a "literal" temple in heaven and a "spiritual temple"—"the church"—on earth.²⁸ Ellen White concurred that while Christ is cleansing the "heavenly sanctuary," "we must enter by faith into the sanctuary with Him, we must commence the work in the sanctuary of our own souls. We are to cleanse ourselves from all defilement."²⁹ Maxwell reasoned, therefore, that the cleansing of the sanctuary in heaven cannot be finished until the cleansing of believers on earth is also finished.³⁰

5. Maxwell always staunchly insisted on the reality and literal existence of the heavenly sanctuary.³¹ He would remind his students that in type-antitype relationships, the type is the figurative or symbolic element, and the antitype is the real, the true. But he also maintained that the heavenly is *not* a finite rectangular box like the desert tabernacle, but rather a structure so immense that, in the language of Ellen White, "no earthly structure could represent its vastness and glory."³²

6. Maxwell saw the prophetic gift manifested through Ellen G. White as messages from Jesus in the Most Holy Place (the "testimony of Jesus," Rev 1:1-2, 9; 12:17; 19:10).

7. Maxwell believed that the ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary is the doctrinal hub of Adventist theology.³³

Controversial and Activist Writings. A final category of Maxwell's writings may be seen as the expression of his soul-passion for the Seventh-day Adventist church, its history, doctrine, and mission. Mervyn Maxwell was not only a scholar, but first and foremost a churchman, a minister of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. His scholarship was always in the service of the church,

²⁷ Eisele, "Interview."

²⁸ O R. L. Crosier to Enoch Jacobs, March 31, 1846, in the *Day-Star*, April 18, 1846, 31; quoted by Maxwell, *Sanctuary and Atonement*, 517–518; 539, n. 11.

²⁹ Ellen G White, *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials* (Washington, DC: Ellen G. White Estate, 1987), 127; quoted in Maxwell, *Sanctuary and Atonement*, 518.

³⁰ Maxwell, Magnificent Disappointment, 120 (see 111-121).

³¹ Note, for instance, the preceding paragraph where Crosier calls the temple in heaven the "literal" sanctuary and the temple on earth—the church—the "spiritual" sanctuary (see note 26)

³² Ellen G White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 357; quoted in Maxwell, *Magnificent Disappointment*, 64.

³³ Eisele, "Interview"; cf. Ellen G. White, *Great Controversy*, 423.

and he did not hesitate to espouse unpopular causes or viewpoints if he perceived that the vitality of the church was at stake.

Consequently, when a proposal was made to close the Pacific Press as a full-service publisher, and merge the printing plant with that of the Review and Herald, Maxwell entered the fray with a tightly reasoned defense of multiple publishing houses, based on SDA history and Ellen White's strong advocacy of the same principle.³⁴ He was a founding member of the Adventist Theological Society, when that was a controversial innovation.³⁵ In 1992, in response to a letter from a General Conference leader, Maxwell authored a fervent defense of *some* of the motivations and purposes of the Adventist organizations termed "independent ministries," even while he refused to sanction others of their emphases and practices.³⁶

The publication to which Maxwell devoted much of the energy of his retirement years began with the debate over the propriety and biblical authority for ordaining women. Maxwell was one of the twenty-seven delegates to the Camp Mohaven conference called in 1973 by the Biblical Research Institute to study the matter. At that point Maxwell was still undecided. By 1987, however, when the campus church at Andrews University proposed ordaining elders, Maxwell's convictions had crystallized to the point that he, with several others, published an eight-page position paper against the ordination of women. The pivotal text for Maxwell was the phrase "husband of one wife" in 1 Tim 3:2. When he found that *aner*, "husband," is always masculine in the NT, he could not evade the conviction that the NT requires elders to be men.³⁷ After three numbers on this and related questions, *Adventists Affirm* moved on to address a variety of doctrinal and lifestyle topics within Adventism.³⁸ Maxwell wrote an article for almost every issue and served as acting editor from 1997 to his death in 1999.³⁹

³⁴ C. M. Maxwell to Faculty and Staff of Andrews University, May 26, 1983, typescript signed (photocopy), Adventist Heritage Center, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

³⁵ Gordon Hyde, "New, Yet Historic," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 1/1 (Spring 1990): 4; C. Mervyn Maxwell, "How to Pick Real Seventh-day Adventists Out of a Bushel of Christians," ibid., 103-117.

³⁶ Maxwell, "On Disciplining Hope International: Some General and Specific Observations, Based on a Letter to a Denominational Leader in Response to a Request of His"(1992), Adventist Heritage Center, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

³⁷ Maxwell, "Let's Be Serious," Adventists Affirm 3 (Fall 1989): 30-31.

³⁸ One of those topics was music, especially music in worship. A college class in conducting had strengthened Maxwell's lifelong interest in hymnology, and here, as in other areas, he had strong convictions. He believed syncopation should be used as a musical flavoring, not as a primary ingredient, and regarded the lyrics of much contemporary religious music as intellectually superficial in comparison to traditional hymnology.

³⁹ In his hospital bed, only hours before his death, his last editorial activity was helping to prepare for publication, *Prove All Things: A Response to Women in Ministry*, ed. Mercedes H. Dyer (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 2000).

Summary

Mervyn Maxwell's academic contributions resulted not from an ambitious scholarly agenda, but from responding to the needs of the church as he became aware of those needs. He was not interested in innovation for innovation's sake, but rather maintained a steadfast devotion to preserving, articulating, and passing on the truths that have made Seventh-day Adventists a distinct movement and people.

In a personal letter written only a few months before he died, Maxwell calculated that his books had sold a total of 700,000 copies—then noted that was only one percent of the 70 million copies sold of books written by his father, Arthur S. Maxwell.⁴⁰

Mervyn's motivation was not to gain academic distinction, but to fulfill his commitment to ministry. As a young pastor he had some marked successes in evangelism. He told me he would never have left evangelism for teaching had not the Lord made it clear that was His will. Mervyn never lost his love for ministry as ministry. He was a pastor to his students and to the end remained active in his local church.

Someone with a perspective not far from that of C. Mervyn Maxwell has remarked that "Anything true is not really new; anything new is not really true." If the topic were human free will, Maxwell would vigorously disagree. But if the subject were doctrine, Maxwell would probably agree. The truth he devoted his life to was the ancient truth of Scripture, as confirmed and amplified by Ellen G. White. He was content to be a conserver, preserver, and proclaimer of that body of truth.

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⁴⁰ Conversation with Stanley Maxwell, September 28, 2000.