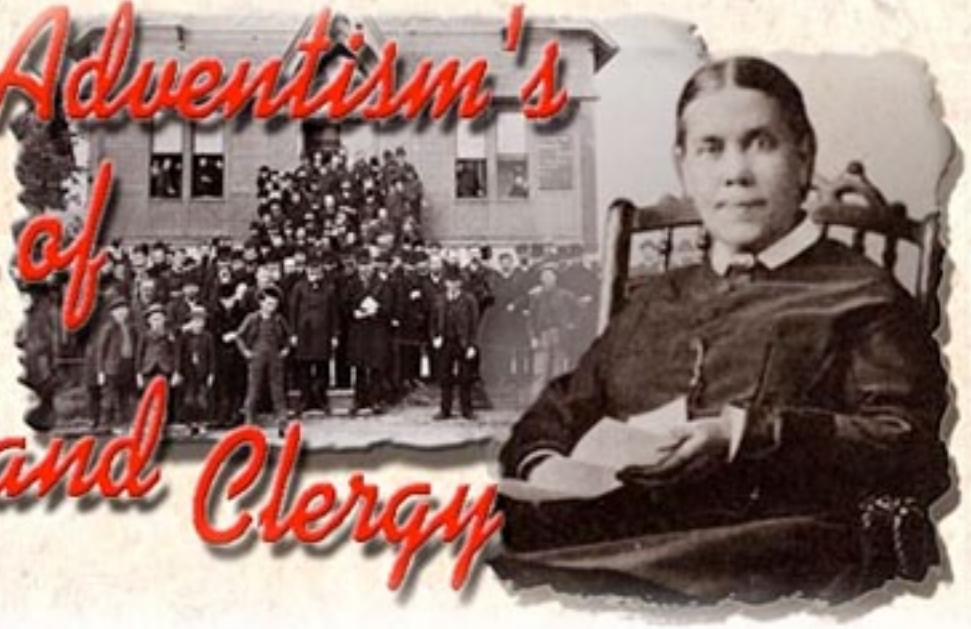


Early Adventism's View of Laity and Clergy



In listing the spiritual gifts in Ephesians 4, the apostle Paul delineates one of those gifts as being that of a pastor. In fact, in Ephesians 4 Paul is primarily talking about the “people gifts” that God has given the church. These gifts include apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. These gifts are given for a specific purpose. They are all basically clergy gifts. Note Paul’s assessment of their role:

“And he gave some apostles; and some prophets; and some evangelists; and some pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”—Ephesians 4:11-13, KJV.

Here, then, are the people gifts that have been given to the church. Verse 13 indicates that these gifts are to endure until we reach the unity of the faith, which will be at the second coming of Christ. These clergy gifts are always going to be needed. Verse 12 indicates the purpose of these gifts. According to the King James Version, it appears that these gifts are for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, and for the edifying of the body of Christ.

However, a misplaced comma in this text in the King James Version creates serious consequences for our theology of the layperson and the pastor. If the King James Version is correct in placing a comma in verse 12 after “saints,” then it would be possible to interpret the text to indicate that one of the jobs of the pastor is the work of the ministry. Yet we have clearly seen that the work of the ministry belongs to the laity, not to the pastor.

All modern versions of this text translate it far more accurately by eliminating the comma, which would make it read: “for the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry.” In other words, the role of the pastor would be to perfect the saints for their ministry. This text is not describing the pastor as a performer of ministry, but instead as a trainer of ministers. Note other translations of this text: 1

“To fit His people for the work of the ministry.”—Twentieth Century New Testament.

“In order fully to equip His people for the work of serving.”—Weymouth.

“For the immediate equipment of God’s people for the work of service.” — Williams.

“To equip God’s people for work in His service.”—New English Bible.

“In order to get His holy people ready to serve as workers.”—Beck.

“His gifts were made that Christians might be properly equipped for their service.”—Phillips.

All of these translations make abundantly clear that the biblical job description of the pastor is of one who trains and equips members for their ministry. The New Testament views clergy, not as performers of ministry, but as trainers of people for their ministries. This is the primary function of the New Testament pastor.

The work of the pastor is to prepare God’s people to do the work of the ministry. It is not the job of the pastor to be the only soul winner in the church. It is not the job of the pastor to do the work of the ministry, but to train the members to do the work of the ministry. It is true that the pastor, as stated in the previous chapter, performs ministry. He does give Bible studies, counsel, visit, etc. But whenever he does it, he is acting in the capacity of a layperson and is not functioning as a pastor. What the pastor is paid to do is to train the members. If he is not doing that, then biblically he is not doing his job.

The Pastor As Trainer

Not only does the Bible mandate training as the chief function of the pastor, but Ellen White does, as well:

“Let the minister devote more of his time to educating than to preaching. Let him teach the people how to give to others the knowledge they have received.”—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, p. 20.

Most pastors would consider preaching to be their chief function. Many laity would likewise concur. While not minimizing the importance of preaching and the great need for strong, biblical preaching in the Adventist church, Ellen White states emphatically that the teaching or equipping role of the pastor should take more time than the preaching role. Yet most pastors spend far more time preparing and preaching sermons than on teaching members how to perform their ministry.



“It is not the Lord’s purpose that ministers should be left to do the greatest part of the work of sowing the seeds of truth.”—*Ibid.*, p. 21.

In most Adventist churches, this counsel is not followed today. If the pastor does not do it, it doesn’t get done. Why shouldn’t pastors do all the seed sowing? Because seed sowing is ministry—and ministry is the job of the laity. Ellen White again states emphatically that the pastor’s first job is to train the members, even before reaching unbelievers.

“In laboring where there are already some in the faith, the minister should at first seek not so much to convert unbelievers, as to train the church members for acceptable co-operation.”—*Gospel Workers*, p. 196.

When the pastor takes over the ministry function of the church and neglects the training function, the church becomes weak spiritually. There is a definite connection between how pastors govern the church and the spirituality of the church. Any pastor who spends most of his time ministering to the members will create a church that is weak spiritually, while conversely, a pastor who spends most of his time training and equipping his members will create a church that is much stronger spiritually.

“God has not given His ministers the work of setting the churches right. No sooner is this work done apparently, than it has to be done over again. Church members that are thus looked after and labored for become religious weaklings. If nine tenths of the effort that has been put forth for those who know the truth had been put forth for those who have never heard the truth, how much greater would have been the advancement made!”—Testimonies for the Church, vol. 7, p. 18.

Nurture for the sake of nurture produces religious weaklings, states the servant of the Lord. Some pastors feel they must nurture people first. Then these nurtured people will automatically go out and witness. However, that is completely contrary to the counsel. Ellen White’s view is that this methodology produces religious weaklings—Laodiceans. Since this is what most pastors have been doing, is it any wonder that our churches are full of religious weaklings? The more care we give them, the weaker they become spiritually.

The great danger churches face as they mature is to spend time tending the aquarium of the saints rather than becoming fishers of men. Yet strangely, the more time they spend nurturing the saints, the weaker the saints become. Even the New Testament church was in danger of losing this sense of mission in its embryonic years. The danger was that the church would stop its forward movement and center on strengthening the saints in Jerusalem. To prevent this, God allowed persecution



to come to the Jerusalem believers so that they would be scattered and thus be forced to concentrate on mission for their own spiritual strength.

“Forgetting that strength to resist evil is best gained by aggressive service, they began to think that they had no work so important as that of shielding the church in Jerusalem from the attacks of the enemy. Instead of educating the new converts to carry the gospel to those who had not heard it, they were in danger of taking a course that would lead all to be satisfied with what had been accomplished. To scatter His representatives abroad, where they could work for others, God permitted persecution to come upon them. Driven from Jerusalem, the believers ‘went everywhere preaching the word.’ “—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 105.

“Strength to resist evil is best gained by aggressive service.” This is the way to victory. The best method by which people can be nurtured and gain victory in their personal lives is by working for souls. So states the pen of inspiration.

“Those who would be overcomers must be drawn out of themselves; and the only thing which will accomplish this great work, is to become intensely interested in the salvation of others.”—Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 207.

It is impossible to be nurtured apart from involvement in soul winning. Ellen White is crystal clear: the only way out of Laodicean lukewarmness is to become involved in evangelistic ministry.

Dr. Kenneth Van Wyk, pastor of the Garden Grove (California) Community Church and a modern church growth expert, confirms what Ellen White told this church nearly one hundred years ago.

“In my judgment, nurture-oriented education commits the serious error of making an end out of something that is meant to be a means. By definition it is self-centered and therefore suffers from basic introversion. . . . The mission-oriented Christian education program holds that the primary purpose of education is to equip people for the growth and outreach of the church. . . . The church is a training center where the people of God are equipped for their respective areas of ministry and mission. Nurture, indeed, comes as a by-product of being equipped and involved in ministry. My experience in Christian education is that a mission mentality in the church motivates people to training and produces astounding results in personal spiritual growth as well as church growth.”—*Pastor’s Church Growth Handbook*, vol. 1, p. 134.

Training is the best nurture that can be given to God’s people, but nurture for the sake of nurture only embeds people more deeply into Laodicean indifference. Our churches have been nurtured to death. We don’t need more nurture. We need training for mission. Training and involving people in ministry is the best nurture we can give them. It is precisely because people have not been trained and involved in ministry that we have so much need of nurture in the church today.

The best remedy for Laodicea is not preaching about Laodicea, it is not preaching about the sins of the church, it is not telling people they ought to work. The best remedy for Laodicea is for pastors to train members and then put them into meaningful ministry in harmony with their spiritual gifts.

“Sometimes ministers do too much; they seek to embrace the whole work in their arms. It absorbs and dwarfs them; yet they continue to grasp it all. They seem to think that they alone are to work in the cause of God, while the members of the church stand idle. This is not God’s order at all.”—*Evangelism*, p. 113.

“The greatest help that can be given our people is to teach them to work for God, and to depend on Him, not on the ministers.”—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, p. 19.



“So long as church members make no effort to give to others the help given them, great spiritual feebleness must result.”—Ibid., pp. 18, 19.

The counsel that Ellen White has given the Seventh-day Adventist church is abundantly clear. Ellen White viewed the role of Adventist ministers as completely different from the traditional pastoral role of the nineteenth century. She was one hundred years ahead of her time.

Today most church growth authorities state that the role of the pastor must be that of a trainer/eqipper. Yet Adventists have a mandate from their prophet for the pastor to be the trainer! How can we continue to create Laodicea by refusing to return to the biblical role of the pastor as the trainer and eqipper of the laity for their ministry?

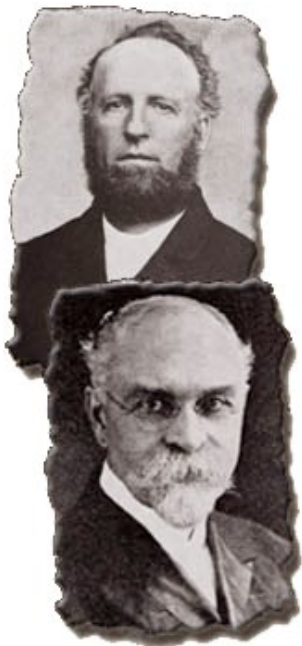


So strong is the counsel that God has given this church in this regard that Ellen White even intimates that any pastor who is performing ministry instead of training his members for ministry should be fired. That sounds harsh, but she says it.

“In some respects the pastor occupies a position similar to that of the foreman of a gang of laboring men or the captain of a ship’s crew. They are expected to see that the men over whom they are set, do the work assigned to them correctly and promptly, and only in case of emergency are they to execute in detail.

“The owner of a large mill once found his superintendent in a wheel-pit, making some simple repairs, while a half-dozen workmen in the line were standing by, idly looking on. The proprietor, after learning the facts, so as to be sure that no injustice was done, called the foreman to his office and handed him his discharge with full pay. In surprise the foreman asked for an explanation. It was given in these words: ‘I employed you to keep six men at work. I found the six idle, and you doing the work of but one. Your work could have been done just as well by any one of the six. I cannot afford to pay the wages of seven for you to teach the six how to be idle.’

“This incident may be applicable in some cases, and in others not. But many pastors fail in not knowing how or in not trying, to get the full membership of the church actively engaged in the various departments of church work. If pastors would give more attention to getting and keeping their flock actively engaged at work, they would accomplish more good, have more time for study and religious visiting, and also avoid many causes of friction.”—Gospel Workers, pp. 197, 198.



Elder James White (top) and A.G. Daniells (above), both presidents of the General Conference, supported the position that all laymen are ministers for the Gospel of Christ.

Does that statement blow your mind? A. G. Daniells, former General Conference president, knew the counsel of the Lord for the Adventist ministry.

He had learned it first-hand from Ellen White. He knew that if we departed from the counsel, our churches would fossilize. No wonder he warned us. But Ellen White warns us even more so. What would happen if conference presidents followed this counsel? There would be few of us pastors left.

This is not meant to be an indictment of the Adventist ministry. We have only performed as we have been taught. Let not the laity cast blame at the pastors, and let not the pastors blame the laity. We got into this problem together. We need to resolve it together. Rather than casting stones at each other, let us come to God and beg His forgiveness for our failure to follow His guidance. Then, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, let laypeople and pastors get together and find a solution to our present problem. It's time to get out of Laodicea. It's time for the laity to resume their role as the performers of ministry. It's time for the pastors to shoulder their role as trainers of the laity. Let's start following the counsel God has given us!

1 These six scripture references are published in The Word: the Bible From 26 Translations. Reprinted by permission of Mathis Publishers, Inc. Box 8621, Moss Point, MS 39563

This article was adapted from Revolution in the Church, pp. 46-55, by Russell Burrill. Reprinted with permission from Hart Research Center, © 1993.