

REX D. EDWARDS

Every Believer a Minister

Ministry

Releases

Every Believer a Minister

Rex D. Edwards

The Ministerial Association
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
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Dedicated

to all the unheralded witnesses
who with artesian resourcefulness have proclaimed
and lived their faith at the frontiers of the little worlds
where they have functioned vocationally and professionally
as "kingdom persons."

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Preface

No age since the first century has offered Christians better opportunities for advancing their faith throughout the world than the present one. The technological revolution of our times has facilitated the proclamation of the Christian evangel "to all the world."

A wheel turned no faster in George Washington's day than in the time of Hannibal, but today wheels and machines turn so fast that man can cover more distance in a few days than he once could in a lifetime. Countries hitherto inaccessible to the gospel are now open to Christian evangelization. In contrast, the Christian advances with such languor as to validate the charge that civilization is in danger of moving into the post-Christian era. When we try to find reasons for this inertia we can only conclude that few Christians actively and consciously seek to propagate their faith at the frontier of the world where they spend their lives vocationally.

"Not one in a hundred among us is doing anything beyond engaging in common, worldly enterprises. We are not half awake to the worth of the souls for whom Christ died."¹ This judgment was made against the church more than seventy years ago. The recent publication, *Patterns of Seventh-day Adventist Church Growth in America*,² indicates no significant change since this testimony was given in 1904. One is reminded of a certain Billy Bray, who sat beside a dying man who groaned, "If I had the power, I'd shout 'Glory to God.'" Billy answered, "It's a pity you didn't shout 'Glory' when you had the power." The plight of this paralytic describes the experience of many Christians who have failed to understand fully

both their role and function in the world and the nature of the church.

My purpose in setting forth these pages is to review the spiritual privileges and responsibilities of Christian laymen from the perspective of both biblical and historical insights. Specific functions and activities of laymen are not within the scope of this work. Rather, it is limited to an effort to interpret the basic biblical principles that directly affect the laymen's understanding of his ministry in the common walks of life, at his work or in his neighborhood. If the laity should possess an adequate understanding of the church and their calling in it, the responsibility for carrying out their ministry would not need legislating. Rather, it would be a spontaneous outgrowth of such an understanding.

In the New Testament the church is seen in vital and daily contact with every element of the world through the lives of its members. Whether assembled together for study and worship or in dispersion, the first-century Christians continually sought to perform every task in the light of their living relationship with the risen Christ. The New Testament churches were ministering fellowships and in the communities ministering agencies. No difference in rank or status divided the people of God. Church leaders were primarily responsible for preparing the congregation for productive service and witness to the people about them. The church was not viewed as a musical society which hired the performers and sat back to enjoy the performance. The church was the orchestra in which each member was assigned his part to play.

Christ committed His ministry to the whole church.

The Saviour's commission to the disciples included all the believers. It includes all believers in Christ to the end of time. It is a fatal mistake to suppose that the work of saving souls depends alone upon the ordained minister.³

And inasmuch as "every follower of Jesus has a work to do as a missionary for Christ, in the family in the neighborhood, in the town or city where he lives,"⁴ then every member is a Christian minister. The demand then for an informed, educated, and equipped laity is self-evident. The question remains: Is there a solid, biblical basis for interpreting the layman's role of ministry? This book is an attempt

to reveal just such a foundation.

In performing library research I have come to agree with Hans-Ruedi Weber's conclusion that "the predicament facing anyone who assembles a bibliography on the laity is due to the great uncertainty which presently exists about the right criteria for judging which publications should be included."⁵ I acknowledge that many authors other than those that appear in the list of references at the end of the book have influenced my thinking, and I am grateful for the assistance of these contributors even though I have not listed them.

¹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, vol. 8, p. 148.

² Gottfried Oosterwal, *Patterns of Seventh-day Adventist Church Growth in America* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1976).

³ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 822.

⁴ Ellen G. White, *Christian Service*, p. 18.

⁵ Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Laici in Ecclesia: An Ecumenical Bibliography on the Laity in the Life and Mission of the Church* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, Department on the Laity, 1961), p. vi.

I Have Sent Them Into the World

Winston Churchill was once asked by an admiring lady if he was a pillar of the church. Churchill replied that he was more like a flying buttress: "I support it from the outside." Did this sage English statesman give to idle church members a lesson in activity? Workers in all lines could well add Christian witness to their daily work. Elton Trueblood, who has strongly influenced such a lay movement on the contemporary scene, has described "the rising tide of interest in *lay religion*" as "the revolt of the laymen."¹ Though nothing as violent as revolution is evident among Christian laymen, many indications of their changing interest and concerns reveal that we are living in an age of ecclesiastical transition. Agitating for a need of radical change in the understanding of the church members' work, one writer suggests:

*The need to restore the broken connection between the Church and life as actually lived demands a radically new understanding of the place and function of the lay members of the Church. . . . A revolution is needed in the present outlook of the Church.*²

Architects of ecclesiology know that the great commission (Matthew 28:20) cannot be fulfilled by members of a ministerial elite, many of whom are administratively imprisoned in the system of a modern complex parish. The tradition that assigns to the pastor

exclusive rights to preach has deprived the laity of its legitimate role of ministry. The work of the layman and the work of the minister should be viewed as synonymous. Yet, the majority in the "comfortable pew" of denominational "Do-Nothingsville" sit uneasy and restless.

The problem is not unrelated to the vocabulary of a religious culture. What do you call a Christian who is not professionally or vocationally in church-related work? A "layman"!

The word "layman" enjoys a wide differentiation of meaning, a common characteristic being that they are stated in contrasts. One definition posits the contrast in terms of the person's employment *outside* the church:

*By 'laity' we mean, . . . the vast body of church members who spend their lives in what is called a secular occupation, which absorbs the major part of their time.*³

Another definition of laymen expresses the contrast in terms of the persons' employment *inside* the church:

*The term "laymen" is here used to distinguish the role of the other church members from the minister's role as a professional one and not to imply that there is any distinction between them as to basic Christian vocation. . . . The pastor is the employed minister of the church, giving his full time to the church; whereas, the layman is a volunteer minister of Jesus Christ devoting a part of his time to the ministry of the church in performing definitely assigned roles.*⁴

A biblical precedent for these contrasts has been established by another scholar, who declares,

*In the Bible ho laos (the laity) is used of the Jewish people, as distinguished from their priests and rulers, in Mt 26⁵, Acts 5²⁶ etc., and especially as distinguished from the high priest and the priests in Heb 5³, 7⁵, 7²⁷; so in the Old Testament, in Ex. 19²⁴, 2 Ch 24¹⁰. Similarly ho laos is frequently used in Greek liturgies to denote the congregation as distinguished from the officiating priest.*⁵

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Association of the General
Conference of Seventh-day
Adventists, is recognized as
the provider of excellence in
resources for building up the
ministry. His work with
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emphasizes his personal
commitment to empowering
laity for ministry.