Guest Editor

Famine in the Land

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The prophet Amos prophesied of a famine that would one day sweep the entire land—"not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord" (Amos 8:11). Explaining the urgency of "preaching the Word," the apostle Paul also warned of a time when people "will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (2 Timothy 4:3, 4).

Today, there are increasing signs that those days prophesied by the Bible writers are upon us. One clear indication for this spiritual starvation is the shortage of Biblical preaching from Christian pulpits. Observing the broad evangelical landscape, one perceptive Christian author has noted:

Many pastors seem content to dole out pabulum to spiritual babies instead of teaching the full counsel of God. Many evangelical ministers have succumbed to delivering secular-sounding, motivational pep talks aimed at soothing the felt needs of restless church shoppers or, worse, salving the guilty consciences of unregenerate church members. Rather than expounding the depths of God's Word, many Bible-believing ministers have chosen the path of least resistance, content to scratch the surface of shallow souls and tickle the ears of languid listeners. The result is congregations are starving—even though many of the famished may not be aware of it—settling for sickly sweet, yet totally inadequate, spiritual pabulum.¹

This spiritual famine for the Word is also discernible in our own Seventh-day Adventist pulpits. Even though preaching is the first of four major responsibilities for which the Seventh-day Adventist pastor receives salary and is responsible (the other three being shepherding, training, and evangelizing),² our preachers are increasingly relegating the pulpit ministry to a second-class status. In many places, the highlight of Sabbath worship service is not the sound proclamation of the Word of God, but rather gospel gimmicks—music, skits or dramas, puppets, movies, talk shows, multimedia, or some other types of entertainment.³

With the growing silence of the Bible in our pulpits, many preachers are fast becoming religious comedians, clowns, and politicians. Even when they make attempts towards Biblical preaching, the trend is toward joking, jesting, and anecdotes. At the very best, the typical preacher today can be described as a religious motivational speaker focusing on human relationships, prosperity, self-help, recovery from addictions, ideological agendas, or
One respected evangelical scholar has accurately described the result of this absence of sound Biblical preaching: "It is no secret that Christ’s church is not at all in good health in many places of the world. She has been languishing because she has been fed, as the current line has it, ‘junk food’; all kinds of artificial preservatives and all sorts of unnatural substitutes have been served up to her. As a result, theological and Biblical malnutrition has afflicted the very generation that has taken such giant steps to make sure its physical health is not damaged by using foods or products that are carcinogenic or otherwise harmful to their physical bodies. Simultaneously a worldwide spiritual famine resulting from the absence of any genuine publication of the Word of God (Amos 8:11) continues to run wild and almost unabated in most quarters of the church."  

If ever there was a time when pastors and preachers needed to heed the Biblical injunction to "preach the Word" (2 Timothy 4:2), it is now. This is why ADVENTISTS AFFIRM is devoting two consecutive issues—this present one and the next—to the pulpit ministry.

In this current issue we spotlight the pulpit ministry of the pioneers of our faith. The intent is to show how our Seventh-day Adventist pioneers sought every opportunity at the pulpit to present our distinctive message and to prepare a people for the Lord. Whether it was at a worship service, funeral service, church dedication, in the territories of unbelievers, in homes, etc., the early pioneers found ways to proclaim the unvarnished Word. Their example is in marked contrast to the current situation.

Ellen G. White (1827–1915) sets the tone by explaining the purpose and manner of preaching. Sr. White was one of the pioneers of the church. From its very inception, Seventh-day Adventists have believed that she was a recipient of the true gift of prophecy. In addition to being a prolific writer, E.G. White was also known for her public speaking, speaking to crowds of varying sizes—the largest on one occasion being about 20,000 people.

Roswell F. Cottrell (1814–1892) was raised a Baptist, but joined the Advent movement in 1851. He served for a time as a member of the Review and Herald editorial committee. His discourse, “Sermon Preached to the Seneca Indians” is believed to be the earliest Sabbathkeeping Adventist sermon that has survived. Published in the May 14, 1857, issue of the Review and Herald, the sermon is also believed to the first attempt by a Sabbathkeeping Adventist to share his faith with members of any American Indian tribe. Cottrell wrote a number of poems and several hymns, two of which are included in the current Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal.

Uriah Smith (1832–1903) was both editor of the Review and Herald and secretary of the newly formed General Conference. He is well known for his work, The Prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. Smith preached the funeral sermon for sixteen-year-old Henry White, eldest son of James and Ellen White, on Monday, December 21, 1863, in Battle Creek, Michigan. This sermon, which appears to be the earliest funeral sermon to have been preserved, gives us a glimpse into the thinking of the pioneers as they buried their loved ones in anticipation of the resurrection.

James White (1821–1881) was a cofounder and visionary leader of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He is credited with starting many of the denomination’s earliest publications, publishing houses, and the Battle Creek College. He also wrote several books and hundreds of articles for various church papers as well as serving as president of the General Conference for a total of ten years. James White preached this sermon on Sabbath, March 5, 1870, in the third Seventh-day Adventist church building to be erected in Battle Creek, Michigan.

Sarepta Myrenda Irish Henry (1839–1900) was a writer and public speaker in the temperance and health reform movements. She was convicted of the Seventh-day Adventist truths while receiving treatment for a heart condition at the Battle Creek Sanitarium, and was baptized in 1896. Shortly afterward she was healed and began preaching and teaching in churches and camp meetings across the country. At the encouragement of Sister White
(who was in Australia at the time), Mrs. Henry began a “Woman Ministry” to encourage the women of our church to rise up to their Christian calling as women. For several years she wrote a weekly column, “Woman’s Gospel Work,” in the Review and Herald. S.M.I. Henry’s sermon sums up the early Adventists’ understanding of the valuable role of women.

John N. Andrews (1829–1883) (after whom Andrews University is named) is widely considered the “theologian” of the early Seventh-day Adventist movement. He also served as president of the General Conference (1867–1869), editor of The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald (1869–1870), and became the denomination’s first official overseas missionary in 1874. As a theologian Andrews articulated the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of Revelation 13, showed why the Sabbath begins and ends at sunset, and his extensive research in History of the Sabbath and the First Day of the Week provided the most comprehensive work on the history of the seventh-day Sabbath. Andrews preached his sermon on Sunday afternoon, April 20, 1879, to an overflow crowd of about 5,000 people during the dedication of the “Dime” Tabernacle in Battle Creek, Michigan. He took his text from the mottoes on the windows of the church.

Stephen N. Haskell (1833–1922) was an evangelist and administrator. He pioneered many missionary activities for the church. For example, in 1885 he led the group that was sent to open denominational work in Australia and New Zealand. In 1887, with three Bible instructors he began SDA work in London, England. He made a world tour on behalf of missionary work in 1889–1890, visiting western Europe, southern Africa, India, China, Japan, and Australia. Haskell was also responsible for the organization of the first SDA church of African-Americans in New York City (1902). He led in temperance work in Maine (1911), began printing books for the blind (1912), and assisted in the development of the White Memorial Hospital (1916). He is best known for his books The Story of Daniel the Prophet, The Story of the Seer of Patmos, and The Cross and Its Shadow.

Alonzo T. Jones (1850–1923) was on the General Conference Committee in 1897 and was editor-in-chief of the Review and Herald from 1897 to 1901. He also became editor of the Signs of the Times, and was later joined by E.J. Waggoner. In 1888, these two men stirred the General Conference session in Minneapolis with their preaching on righteousness by faith. For several years thereafter, they preached on that subject from coast to coast. Ellen White accompanied them on many occasions. She saw in Jones’s presentations of “the precious subject of faith and the righteousness of Christ . . . a flood of light” (1888 Materials, p. 291).

We are indebted to several individuals, especially Adventist Heritage Ministry, for providing us with good samples of sermons and some relevant background information on them. We offer this issue to you, in the hope that your heart will be richly warmed as you “listen” to the messages that shaped the life and mission of our denomination. More importantly, we pray that the example of the early Adventist preachers inspire all ADVENTISTS to reAFFIRM the centrality of Biblical preaching in our various churches.

NOTES


5 Adventist Heritage Ministry is dedicated to preserving and sharing the history and experiences of the early Seventh-day Adventist Church. For more information, visit the Web site: www.adventistheritage.org.