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# The Burbank Case

## Some Political Perspectives

by Ervin Taylor

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**R**epresentative — the form of church government which recognized that authority in the church rests in the church membership with executive responsibility delegated to representatives bodies and officers for the governing of the church. . . . The representative form of church government is that which prevails in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 1971 edition, p. 46.

The Southern California Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has “ecclesiastical control and authority over all Seventh-day

Adventist Churches” in Southern California. . . . The conference is “the local governing body of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church which is an *extremely highly organized hierarchical church*.” Sworn statement of Southern California Conference President in a civil suit filed against the Burbank Seventh-day Adventist Church and eight named members of the church, in the Superior Court of the State of California for the County of Los Angeles, April 23, 1975.

**T**he *Los Angeles Times* religion page for Saturday morning, March 29, 1975, carried a headline: “Adventist Group Protests Expul-

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sion.” The story carried the news of the removal of the Burbank Seventh-day Adventist Church from the “sisterhood” of Seventh-day Adventist churches in southern California. A follow-up story in the *L.A. Times* Sunday edition was entitled “Expelled Adventists Defy Church Chiefs.” This account reported that members of the expelled Adventist congregation in Burbank met for an Easter service despite protests of three representatives of the Southern California Conference that it was unlawful for them to do so. According to the *Times* reporter, the Burbank police, called to the scene by conference officials, did not interfere and the Easter services were held.

What manner of church was Burbank? Some may be surprised to learn that it was one of the first churches in the denomination to formally propose the creation of lay advisory committees for local conferences. Burbank was the first church in the Southern California Conference to urge openly the creation of a human relations committee to deal with the problems of racial discrimination in hiring and promotion at Adventist institutions. It was also the first Adventist congregation to put into effect its own constitution which formalized a dominant role for laymen in the administration of the local church.

The developments relevant to our discussion began in 1963 with the appointment of Wayne P. Jones as pastor.<sup>1</sup> Jones arrived at Burbank committed to supporting a climate where intellectual and religious freedom could flourish.

During 1963 and 1964, a major reorganization of the local church’s political and fiscal structure was carried out. The keystone of the new system was a conviction that the internal operation of the church was the total responsibility of laymen. A fundamental element in the reorganization was provisions which allowed the pastor to totally relinquish his role as church administrator to permit him to function full time in his pastoral capacity. In his place, a layman was elected on a year-to-year basis to function as both church administrator and chairman of the church board. Specific organizational responsibilities such as education, welfare, finance,

plant operations and social activities were delegated to elected department heads who reported to the church administrator, not to the pastor.

Even before the pastorate of Jones, the Burbank Church Board Minutes record objections to the “Ingathering” system. In 1964, Burbank voted to withdraw, as a church, from the public solicitation aspect of the Ingathering campaign. Research by Burbank members, especially Jones and Wesley Nash, a banking executive, had uncovered the fact that the local conference administration set the total Ingathering goals of local churches as much as 500 percent higher than was necessary to supply the funds requested by the General Conference for support of the international missionary activities of the denomination. The local conference was then enabled to receive back from the General Conference a percentage of those “excess” funds with no restrictions as to use. Since donations had been originally solicited by church members from the general public under the impression that they were destined for foreign mission use, such a reversion policy, in the view of many Burbank members, represented, at the least, a serious misrepresentation, or, at most, bordered on fraud.

Also by this time, the nature of the tithing system that the denomination promulgated came under scrutiny. The basic question was, “What organizational unit of the church — the local church or conference organization(s) — should exclusively benefit from the tithing system?” A simple change of wording on the Burbank offering envelope reflected this issue. The word “tithe” was replaced by “Southern California Conference.” The point was that the tithe denoted an amount. Whether that amount should be contributed to the work of the church at the conference or local church level (or divided in some manner) should be at the option of the member.<sup>2</sup>

The 1965 Biennial Constituency Meeting of the Southern California Conference offered Burbank a regional forum where it could offer recommendations for effective change within the existing political

framework of the church. Burbank's involvement and recommendation were modest. Delegates requested published agendas and departmental reports as well as a study of support given to local churches for secretarial help. In addition, one of Burbank's delegates read a minority report from the constitution and bylaws committee. The reaction of the conference administration to Burbank's activities was immediate — it asked for a meeting with the church. Although a whole host of specific issues were raised, the basic question revolved around the issue of "loyalty" to the larger church body.

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Beginning in 1966, several Burbank members separately organized and published a journal called *Perspective* as an experiment to assess the spirit of the church's commitment to free and open dialogue and discussion. During its three-year life, its maximum circulation was 1,700 paid subscriptions. *Perspective's* general inability to attract denominationally employed contributors to its pages, its occasional excursions into radical expressions of dissent and its limited funding were fatal flaws in its operation. One of its major contributions, however, was the stimulus it gave to General Conference support of the launching of a more moderate counterpart, SPECTRUM.

The participation of the Burbank Church at the 1967 biennial constituency meeting again involved the support of a few simple proposals, including the establishment of a lay advisory committee for the conference. Two of Burbank's proposals were accepted by the delegates. Immediately following the constituency meeting, however, rumors began to circulate that Jones was being re-

moved as pastor of the church. Four weeks later, he was informed that his four-year tenure as pastor was at an end; he was being "called" to a *smaller* church as an *assistant* pastor.

It was clear that the action removing Jones as pastor was in direct response to his unwillingness to invoke his clerical status to alter the collective opinions and policies of the lay-constituted organization of the Burbank Church. Conference officials were totally opposed to an open discussion of the issues surrounding the ouster, but did finally consent to discuss them with the elders of the local church. At this meeting, the conference treasurer summed up the differences. They related to the symbol of the organized denominational authority over the local church — the *Church Manual*: "We (the conference) feel that the *Church Manual* is a guiding principle. You in the Burbank congregation feel that it is something that should be accepted or rejected by a local church." Attempts to set up, on an ongoing basis, dialogues between the Burbank Church and the conference officials were unsuccessful. Unable to obtain any redress from its parent organization, Burbank took upon itself the employment of its former pastor as Minister of Social Concern. This action was not unprecedented, since Burbank had supported its own associate pastor as far back as 1961.

Over the following seven years, Burbank's relationship with the local conference administration was consistently directed by the local church leadership away from those issues which might cause potential confrontation possibilities.

In August 1974, the conference appointed pastor reported the conference's renewed "unhappiness" with sections of Burbank's constitution dealing with the role of the conference-designated pastor, with the refusal of the church to enforce vague "standards" of conduct on those holding church offices and, finally, with ill-defined "abuses" in the financial administration of the church. On three different occasions, committees elected by the church met with conference officials to review these matters. It was the

clear desire of a majority of the church to resolve the problems and, in this spirit, a request went out on January 27, 1975 from the church's assembly requesting from the conference a detailed, exhaustive and specific listing of their dissatisfactions with the Burbank Church program. As the chairman of the church board and church administrator at that time stated:

We are, of course, already familiar with some problem areas, but are disturbed by the persistence of a seemingly endless stream of questions, "allegations" and "rumors" concerning the Burbank Church which has had, and will continue to have, unless checked, a most insidious and debilitating effect upon our struggle to serve as a positive, progressive Christian witness in the community and among our sister churches. Hence, we feel that it is essential to have an exhaustive list of all problem areas set forth in writing.<sup>3</sup>

This the conference administration refused to do. Instead, their response was to present to the February 1975 meeting of the conference Lay Advisory Committee a "recommendation" that the conference administration "take whatever steps are necessary to reorganize, disband, expel or otherwise bring the Burbank Church into harmony with the Sisterhood of Churches, and that the issue be brought to the Conference constituency at its 1975 session."

With the 1975 constituency meeting now a little more than a month away, the Burbank Church sent a letter to the conference requesting that each and every specific charge against it be put in writing, that a full and fair hearing be held and that conference officers and employees desist from making any verbal charges, insinuations or derogatory remarks about the officers or members of the Burbank Church.

On Saturday morning, March 25, 1975, six hours before the opening of the constituency meeting, all three executive officers of the conference administration appeared unannounced at the church service. After delivering the sermon, the conference president delivered an ultimatum: disband or face the

consequences. The Burbank congregation, by a solid majority, refused to disband.<sup>4</sup> A document containing the specifications of the charges that the Burbank congregation had been requesting for about 12 months was then presented to the congregation. The "recommendation" contained the text of the motion which was to be the first item of business at the constituency meeting to be held on that evening in the Ellen G. White Memorial Church in Los Angeles. This action proposed that the constituency expel the Burbank Adventist Church from the "sisterhood" of Adventist churches, transfer all of its members to the "Conference Church" and declare the Burbank Church "closed."

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At the Sabbath evening constituency session, the motion passed by a vote of 664 to 115 with 7 abstentions.

Alerted by an announcement mailed from the Burbank congregation that services would continue, the conference administration sent letters to all members of the "former" Burbank Church stating that the physical plant was closed and "anyone entering without permission will be charged with a trespass."<sup>5</sup> The following Sabbath morning, despite the presence of police, services were held with about 70 members in attendance. Five days later, six members of the Burbank Church, including the church administrator, head elder and three members of the ministerial staff were declared disfellowshipped by a vote of the conference committee. The basis of the action of the conference committee was their assertion that since the members of the Burbank Church had been transferred to the Conference Church, the conference executive committee could de-

clare members of the Conference Church disfellowshipped.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the disfellowshipping action, services at the Burbank Church continued. On April 23, the Southern California Conference filed a lawsuit in Los Angeles County Superior Court listing as defendants the Burbank Seventh-day Adventist Church and seven members of the church. The suit asked for immediate possession of the church property by the conference administration, a restraining order preventing the use of the building by Burbank Church members and a declaration that the Southern California Conference owned the name "Burbank SDA Church." In the documents filed by the conference, it was declared that the Southern California Conference of Seventh-day Adventists had "ecclesiastical control and authority over all Seventh-day Adventist Churches" in southern California and declared that the conference is the "local governing body of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church which is an *extremely highly organized hierarchical church*." The last five words in this sentence were underlined in the conference brief.<sup>7</sup>

The court denied a request by the conference attorneys for an immediate restraining order and asked the parties to prepare for a trial on the merits of the case. Services continued on a week-to-week basis for the next nine months. In March 1976, a trial was held in Department 86 of the Superior Court located in Glendale, the city in which the conference offices were located. The right of the conference to control and dispose of the property as it saw fit was affirmed as was the ownership of the church's name. The church's checking and savings account was awarded to the congregation. Within a few weeks, a "new" Burbank Church was organized under conference sponsorship. The leadership core of the "old" Burbank Church formed an independent "church-in-exile" fellowship maintaining its corporate identity and continuity.<sup>8</sup>

Three of the disfellowshipped members appealed to the Pacific Union Conference committee citing prohibitions in the *Church Manual* against unilateral transference of membership in the absence of a request by a

member and thus the lack of jurisdiction of the local conference executive committee. The union conference affirmed the right of the local conference to disfellowship.<sup>9</sup> One member then appealed to the General Conference, specifically to Neal Wilson as the then vice president for North America. In an unprecedented move, the General Conference directed the local conference president to notify the "disfellowshipped" members that their disfellowshipment was null and void, especially rejecting the right of a constituency assembly to vote unilateral membership transfers. Members of the "old" Burbank Church were thus in the interesting and unique position of having membership in the denomination while not being members of any specific congregation unless they personally requested that such action be taken.<sup>10</sup>

On the surface, the Burbank Case seems relatively simple and straightforward. A local Adventist church wanted to exercise more autonomy than the local conference could permit. Over an extended period of time, the local church persisted in an independent course. Local conference officials were unable to persuade it to conform. These officials felt they had no alternative but to exercise their authority under the *Church Manual* to close down the insubordinate group. However, the public statements of these conference officials strongly suggest that they saw much more at stake than simply who was to control a rather small congregation in a suburb of Los Angeles. Witness, for example, the fact that the 1980 General Conference was asked to endorse a thoroughgoing revision of Chapter 14 of the *Church Manual* on "Organizing, Uniting, and Disbanding Churches." The new chapter, which will carry the title "Organizing, Uniting, Disbanding, and *Expelling Churches*," clearly has been written to ensure that Burbank will never happen again.<sup>11</sup> What is the Burbank Case telling us about the nature of the Adventist Church, particularly in its contemporary structure?

I can here offer only an abstracted version of what is available elsewhere in much

greater detail. Those interested in the basis on which the following statements have been formulated are invited to request the full text of this paper.<sup>12</sup> I submit that the Burbank Case can best be understood within the context of the following observations:

1. Although the organizational structure of the Adventist Church is represented as a five-tier organization, functionally it can be divided into two levels: a lay-constituted structure (the local congregation) and a clerically constituted structure (all other levels).
2. Although the organizational system of the Adventist Church has been called “representative” in the *Church Manual*, a more accurate descriptive term would be “democratic centralism” as

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it is phrased in the Constitution of the U.S.S.R.<sup>13</sup>

3. Political power in the Adventist Church is currently effectively concentrated in the hands of a professional clergy. There are at least two distinct levels of authority within this group: an administrative clergy (conference officials and institutional administrators) and a pastoral clergy (local church pastors). Ranking below both segments of the professional clergy in terms of political power is the lay membership of the church.
4. The current political dominance of the professional clergy has been institutionalized in the denominational organizational structure and in the implementation of the church’s administrative policies, the most important of which are codified in the *Church Man-*

*ual*. The *Church Manual* contains the elements of a political charter which legitimizes the dominant role of the professional clergy and the current political structure of the church.

5. A central ideological buttress of the present political system is the sacramental character of the denomination’s bureaucratic and organizational structures, *i.e.*, the view that the church’s political system has been ordained of God.
6. A central functional buttress of the present system has been the successful implantation of a set of norms in most lay members which mandates that the vast overwhelming percentage of funds contributed at the local level — mostly in the form of the tithe — cannot be used at the local level but must be remitted into the hands of the clerically controlled administrative units.
7. The pastoral clergy — the local church pastors — are paradoxically in the weakest and, at the same time, potentially in the most politically powerful position in the church. On one hand, as the political representatives of the professional clergy at the grass roots level, they are charged with responsibility for seeing that the local church unit functions in a manner compatible with the priorities of the clerically constituted structures. On the other hand, the total economic stability and viability of the church depends on the predictable flow of funds from the local church to the local conference and above. Clearly, the whole operation of the administrative apparatus of the church above the local church level would rapidly be disestablished without this constant flow of lay-generated funds.

When one examines the church’s current political structure in the light of these observations, it is perhaps somewhat easier to understand the real or imagined threat posed by Burbank to leadership. It was not simply that a local church was insubordinate. It was the fact that Burbank directly and openly challenged on a point-by-point basis the central

ideological and functional foundations of the church's political system. At the core of the challenge was a collision of two highly divergent views of the source and nature of legitimate political authority in the denomination.

Since the ouster of John Harvey Kellogg in the first decade of this century, a clerical "party" has developed and successfully promulgated what we will call a *sacerdotal model* of church polity. This model views the church's political system as an integral extension of its theological or doctrinal structure. In the same sense that the Adventist Church's doctrinal teachings are seen as true and as reflecting a correct interpretation of Scripture, it is assumed that the present organization is ordained of God and the present clerical leadership is carrying out their God-prescribed responsibilities. The legitimacy of their authority derives from a supernatural source. There seems to be a tendency to conduct the business of the church as if God speaks more clearly to professional clergymen than he does to ordinary laymen. A logical extension of this view is that any open opposition to current policies and practices is seen as an act of disloyalty to the church with the strong implication that such actions are also somehow contrary to the will of God.

Within the space of about a decade, Burbank evolved a consensus on what we will call a *participatory model* of church polity. This model sees political authority in the church as deriving its legitimacy from the expressed consent of the governed — the majority of the members. In theological terms, this model assumes that God can and does speak as authoritatively concerning the operation of the church to the laity as he apparently does to members of the clergy. The will of God as expressed through the collective consensus of church members is as valid a source of legitimate political authority as that derived from a clerical interpretation of some designated external authority.

As Burbank's internal political operations increasingly came to reflect the characteristics described in the participatory model, it was inevitable that a question would be asked

whether the present organizational structure was a reflection of a God-given mandate or evolved as a result of a human tendency for a group acquiring authority to want to validate the political power it has acquired. The development of a Burbank political consensus opted for the latter view seeing the *Church Manual* primarily as a charter by which a clerical minority operated and justified a political system over which it had acquired almost total control.

The focus on the church's clerical establishment may cause some to infer that the cause of and/or "blame" for the present political system lies at the feet of the professional clergy. It is important to state specifically that, in the view of the writer, the pastoral and administrative clergy, with few exceptions, are sincerely attempting to carry out what they conceive to be "God's will" in the corporate life of the church. If any "blame" should be assigned, it should be directed at the majority of Adventists, the laymen. More than a decade ago, Dr. Leif Tobiasen succinctly summed up the basic cause of the present political system: "the actual behavior of the church members as they discharge (or shrink from discharging) their responsibilities in connection with church decisions and church elections."<sup>14</sup> He then states:

Whatever fault, if any, may be found among the clergy, our organization . . . can rectify it if the church members have the will. If the church members have insufficient will, the clergy is tempted beyond resistance. . . .

The great lesson from the second, . . . third, and fourth centuries is that when and where members of the Christian churches ceased to take a personal interest in the administration and the elections of the church, the episcopacy and eventually the papacy evolved. This evolution was not . . . planned by the clergy or the hierarchy; it was caused, fundamentally, in the churches. If a similar situation should develop among us now, it would be difficult to believe that we could escape a similar evolution. But the responsibility would not rest solely on the clergy or the Establishment but also on the individual members of the church.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The history of the Burbank Church outlined in this article is based mainly on three sources. For developments to the end of the Jones era, see Charles Randall, "The Burbank Case," *Perspective*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (summer 1967), pp. 8-13. For greater detail and a political analysis up to 1967, see George W. Colvin, Jr., "Conflict: A Study in Church Politics," unpublished manuscript prepared for a Seminar in Political Behavior at California State University, Los Angeles, March 1972. The discussion of developments from the end of the Jones era to the present time (1979) is based on unpublished materials, including minutes, memos, letters and other documents, copies of which are in the possession of the author and John Craven. Conclusions and the selection of data from the primary documents are entirely the responsibility of the author. Readers should be aware that the author was a participant-observer in the episodes at Burbank from 1963 to the present and freely admits any resulting bias. The views expressed are entirely his and may not reflect the opinion of any other member of "old" Burbank Adventist Church.
2. More recently, church officials have emphasized that Ingathering solicitations should emphasize both foreign and "home" missions. It should also be noted that the term "tithe" was returned to the offering envelope about six months later, following meetings between representatives of the Southern California Conference and the Burbank Congregation.
3. Letter of E. Nathan Schilt to Harold L. Calkins, January 27, 1975.
4. There has been confusion over this point due to certain statements made by conference officials. The conference officers that were present at Burbank on March 22 had prepared a ballot that was handed out to those attending the church service on that day. The ballot asked whether church members wished the conference to take control of the Burbank Church. The vast overwhelming majority of members present on that day refused to even participate because such a procedure violated the Burbank Constitution. In a business meeting called by the church administrator following the church service, those present voted overwhelmingly against disbanding.
5. Letter of Harold L. Calkins to "Former Members of the Burbank SDA Church," duplicated, March 27, 1975.
6. Minutes of the Southern California Conference Executive Committee, pp. 4341-4342, 1975 (under listing: Burbank Church 7450-75).
7. Superior Court of the State of California for the County of Los Angeles, Case No. NC C11391-B, 1975.
8. The name of the "church-in-exile" is the Church of the Adventist Fellowship.
9. Appeals Committee Report, Pacific Union Conference, 8 pages, duplicated, September 7, 1975.
10. Under provisions of the *Church Manual* in force in 1975, there are only three ways in which one can lose his membership in the Adventist Church: through death, loss of contact or disfellowshipping. Obviously, death or loss of contact is not relevant in these cases. The disfellowshipping was declared reversed. Therefore, all are still members of the church. See *Church Manual*, pp. 70, 95, 239.
11. See *Review and Herald*, December 15, 1977, pp. 13-14.
12. Anyone interested in receiving the complete manuscript is invited to write the author at the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Riverside, CA 92521.
13. I would invite anyone who feels this suggestion to be unjustified to read the section in the *Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics* adopted in 1977. An English translation was published by the Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, Moscow, 1977. In that edition the section appears on page 20: "The Soviet state is organized and functions on the principle of democratic centralism, namely the electiveness of all bodies of state authority from the lowest to the highest, their accountability to the people, and the obligation of lower bodies to observe the decisions of higher ones. Democratic centralism combines central leadership with local initiative and creative activity and with the responsibility of each state body and official for the work entrusted to them."
14. Leif Tobiassen, Letter to the Editor, *Perspective*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer 1967), pp. 6-7.