
Burbank: Other Perspectives

by Jerry Wiley

ALbert Einstein suggested years ago that our perspective, our relative position, defines reality. Elsewhere in this issue of *SPECTRUM*, Ervin Taylor offers his view of the Burbank Case and takes the role of apologist for that experience and sets forth arguments for a changed form of church governance and structure. In order to sharpen the reader's perspectives on the issue confronted in the Burbank Case, I offer some other perspectives as set forth below without comment on Taylor's major premise, which I read to be that the form of church governance in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is no longer sound, or at the very least, the form of church governance of the Seventh-day Adventist Church should be carefully and seriously reexamined. Robert Peterson and Elder Harold Calkins, president of the Southern California Conference, have both read this short response to Taylor for factual accuracy but are not responsible for the choice of language or any conclusions herein. Throughout my reply, I shall use "Burbank" to denote the group of members who were in control of the local Burbank Church and "the Church" to denote the sisterhood of churches in southern California represented in their constituency meetings and between constituency meetings by the Southern California Conference.

By opening his article with the quotation

from the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (hereinafter *Church Manual*) and the quotation from some of the evidence in the lawsuit, Taylor offers the readers a concept he and the Burbank group found necessarily incompatible, namely that a church could at once be "representative" and at the same time "extremely highly organized." The position of Burbank both within the sisterhood of churches and later before the court was that the Church simply could not be simultaneously or logically representative and highly organized. Both the sisterhood of churches, acting in the constituency meeting he refers to, and the court rejected this argument. Another way of viewing the dispute between Burbank and the Church is to call attention to the fact that Burbank wished to unilaterally change the form of church government from representative and highly organized (local church, local conference, union conference, division, general conference) to congregational¹, and that it wished to do so unilaterally, *i.e.*, without the sanction of the sisterhood or general corporate body of believers. It was from this perspective that the sisterhood, through the constituency, and the court viewed the dispute, and from that perspective, both made judgments against Burbank.

One of the ironies of the Burbank issue seems to me to have been that those in control of Burbank never understood that the policies they offered for betterment, many of which Taylor refers to, were suspect in the eyes not only of the conference leadership, as

Jerry Wiley is associate dean and professor of law at the University of Southern California.

he notes, but also in the eyes of the representatives of the other churches, because Burbank's methods seemed to the constituency to be suspect, and Burbank's posture unduly adversarial.

An evidence instructor of mine once observed that most of what we accept as fact is opinion, and as such, its setting subjects it to distortion, and the distortion may well lead to a result which is therefore incorrect. For example, while Taylor is technically correct in stating that "the Burbank congregation, by a solid majority, refused to disband" (p. 28), SPECTRUM'S readers may find that their perspective is changed to know that the "solid majority" referred to was a solid majority of those present and voting and that the total group voting represented only about 15 percent of the membership in the church.² One of the pieces of evidence prepared for trial later included some earlier minutes of the Burbank meetings, wherein the leaders were quoted in their own minutes to the effect that, although they were only a small minority of the membership, they could seize and maintain control of the local church because they were highly organized.³ I was reminded of the old adage that bad governments are the result of good citizens who do not vote when, at one point, we heard many of the members who had attended in Burbank say that they simply would no longer attend there because they did not like what was going on. That led me to the position that the quiescent members got what they deserved by not participating. Later, however, I realized that most people go to church for healing and help and not for stress and controversy. Thus, it may be that an organized minority can always control a single church.

When Taylor reports the site of the trial before the court, he offers two statements which are inaccurate in different ways. First, the Department was not "86" but rather Department "D."⁴ This bit of dramatizing may be inconsequential, but the other inaccuracy regarding the situs of the trial seems more significant and may tell SPECTRUM'S readers something about reality. Taylor

states, "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" (p. 29). I assume he offers the latter clause so that the readers may draw some inference from it. Before you finalize any inference, let me note that the case was originally set for trial in Burbank and was moved to Glendale as a result of the action of Taylor's attorney, *i.e.*, the attorney for the named defendants and the Burbank group. The Church, acting through the conference, was quite happy to try the case anywhere, including Burbank, but that did not suit the Burbank group, so that the case was moved from Burbank to the next nearest court as a result of Burbank's action.⁵

The question of church membership once a congregation has been disbanded by the sisterhood of churches sitting in constituency meeting is one upon which the *Church Manual* is unfortunately ambiguous. I offer as some evidence for that conclusion that the constituency, local conference and union conference thought that one thing occurred or should occur to church membership when a church is removed from the constituency, and the General Conference thought something else. And alas, Taylor and I disagree as to what the General Conference ultimately decided even now.

The *Church Manual* stated in part, "In any case of disbanding a church, for whatever reason, a full statement of the facts shall be presented at the session of the conference or field, and action shall be taken dropping the church from the list of constituent churches and a record of this shall be made in the minutes of the conference or field giving the reason for disbanding."⁶ Unfortunately, there is no language following the section in the *Church Manual* on disbanding describing the procedure to be followed in dealing with the membership of the individual members. Alternatives seemed to include: (1) an assumption that with the disbanding all former members were disfellowshipped, *i.e.*, had no church membership even though not individually disfellowshipped for cause; (2) that the individuals were members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church but in some sort of suspended membership; and (3) that

the constituency had the power to decide membership inasmuch as they could remove the entire church. Because the constituency strongly desired to hurt no individual in its attempt to deal with Burbank, in a spirit of loving concern for each individual, it decided that the *Church Manual* language set forth below meant that those whose memberships resided in Burbank would become members of the Conference Church until such a time as an individual member asked for transfer.

If in the membership of a disbanded or expelled church there are loyal and worthy members who desire to remain with the body, they may be organized into a new church, or by vote of the conference committee may be recommended for membership in another church.⁷

Additionally, the sisterhood of churches in its constituency meeting considered that since letters of transfer to other churches were not to be made prior to the constituency's decision to expel or disband, that letters of transfer to some new church should be granted to all loyal members. Who then was to issue the letters? The constituency read the absence of direct instruction in the *Church Manual* to mean that the memberships of all of the Burbank congregation would then be in the Conference Church, and that the Conference Committee was empowered to act as the Conference Church because its membership, by its nature, could not be called together.⁸

As noted above, Taylor and I disagree as to what the General Conference reversal of the subsequent attempt to disfellowship for cause certain dissident leaders from Burbank meant to the former members. Those of us who examined the instruction from the General Conference were not only perplexed, but also dismayed, for our reading of the instruction to the local Conference Committee was that the Conference could not have disfellow-

lowshipped the dissident members, *because* the constituency action had already deprived them of their church membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and therefore there was nothing from which to disfellowship them, *i.e.*, no membership on which to act. This was disquieting because it meant that all of the loyal members of Burbank who wanted to attend a "normal" church were disfellowshipped by the constituency action removing Burbank from the sisterhood, although they were not disfellowshipped for cause. A number of us sought clarification and were told that that was the correct interpretation of the General Conference position. Stated another way, the Conference Committee could not disfellowship for cause a person who had already been disfellowshipped by disbanding or exclusion of his/her former church, for there was no church membership over which to take jurisdiction.⁹ While this seemed a result less gentle than that sought by the constituency and subsequently the Conference Committee, it was binding. Thus, it appears that Taylor is *incorrect* in stating that "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" (p. 29).

An exploration of any complex church issue is in order, but I do not believe that a single congregation, acting unilaterally, has the right to change the rules against the expectations of generations of prior believers. As one older member who had left Burbank said to us, "Don't let them take our church. We built that church as a part of the denomination, and not as a local group merely carrying the Church's name." That statement was echoed in many forms throughout the controversy and poses another perspective on the reality of the dispute.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See pp. 46-47 of *The Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (hereinafter *Church Manual*), 1967 edition. All references to the *Church Manual* are from that edition since it was the edition accepted as controlling

by disputants.

2. Evidence prepared for trial in the Burbank Case.

3. Evidence prepared for trial in the Burbank Case.

4. Court record on file in Los Angeles County.

5. Court record on file in Los Angeles County.
6. *Church Manual*, pp. 249-50.
7. *Church Manual*, p. 249.
8. See *Church Manual*, pp. 67, 70, 249-50.
9. I personally discussed at length the General Conference position with President Neal Wilson, then vice

president for North America, on two occasions and was assured that the General Conference understood and intended its interpretation to result in disfellowshipping *without* cause all members of the former Burbank Church.

Misperceptions of Burbank

by George Colvin, Jr.

Dr. R. Ervin Taylor's article is useful as a first attempt at a political understanding of Seventh-day Adventist church government and as a partial explanation of the Burbank case. The realities, however, are so much larger than his excessively confining categories, particularly for Adventist government as a whole, that his efforts to force them into his analytical box remind one of Dorothy L. Sayers' description of an attempt to "force a large and obstreperous cat into a small basket":

As fast as you tuck in the head, the tail comes out; when you have at length confined the hind legs, the forepaws come out and scratch; and when, after a painful struggle, you shut down the lid, the dismal wailings of the imprisoned animal suggest that some essential dignity in the creature has been violated and a wrong done to its nature.¹

Dr. Taylor asserts that the situation at Burbank church contrasted with the situation in Adventist government generally. He contends that in the Adventist church as a whole, power is wielded by the administrative clergy, who control the lay members

through organizational structures (codified in the *Church Manual*), functionaries (particularly the local pastors), and clerically-inspired norms (including the divine ordination of the structure). This is a "sacerdotal model" of church polity, whose secular equivalent is the governmental structure of the Soviet Union.² Against this model the Burbank church evolved a "participatory model," in which power is held by anyone whom the "collective consensus of church members" designates, and the structure is not divinely ordained. The Burbank case was a defense of the "sacerdotal model" by the administrative clergy against the challenge of the "participatory model" as established at Burbank church.

Problems in this analysis abound. The "participatory model" appeared to be opposed to reliance on interpretation of "some designated external authority" for guidance on church organization. Yet the Adventist church relies on an interpretation of an "external authority," the Bible, for its theological teachings. Even to the limited extent that the term "participatory model" describes Burbank church government, that model attempts to separate theology from polity, which is both unnecessary and unwise. A different model based on a more member-directed interpretation of Scripture would

¹ George Colvin, Jr., is completing his doctorate in government at the Claremont Graduate School. His dissertation studies Adventist church government.