

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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

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unify theology and polity and yet change the current emphasis in a “participatory” direction.

In addition, Dr. Taylor does not identify the locus of power in his “participatory model.” If laymen in general are to have real decision-making power, this power must be located at the level accessible to most laymen — the congregational level. There is thus an implicit congregationalism in Dr. Taylor’s “participatory model.” In his analysis, the choice lies between this congregational form and a severely centralized (“sacerdotal”) one. Yet, the best option is neither a centralized nor a decentralized form, but rather a healthy blend of centralization and decentralization that fits the contest and the jobs to be done and encourages participation by the most competent people. These people would be equally frustrated, though in different ways, by both of Dr. Taylor’s options.

The inadequacy of Dr. Taylor’s analysis is also seen in his treatment of Burbank church. By and large, what factual material Dr. Taylor presents is accurate. His interpretations, however, are confused. They portray Burbank church’s actions both as a “point-by-point” challenge to the present system and as “modest,” “simple,” “not unprecedented,” and certainly nonconfrontational. A close acquaintance with Burbank’s history shows that Burbank was not only attempting to implement a “participatory model”; it was also working out the essentially congregationalist implications of this model, which Dr. Taylor understates. It appears that the congregationalist actions, rather than Burbank’s structure, were in fact the bulk of the reasons for the crises. The lay-controlled Burbank structure acted primarily to intensify the crises when they arose by requiring the conference administration to deal with a structure and leaders they did not understand, disliked, and could not control without drastic action.

Some of these congregationalist actions are mentioned by Dr. Taylor himself: formation of a Burbank “constitution” that referred to the “voluntary bond” by which Burbank was united with the Adventist church; withdrawal from Ingathering; replacement of the denominationally sanctioned term “tithe” on

offering envelopes by other terminology; and hiring Burbank’s former pastor, no longer credentialed by the Adventist church, as a minister on a salary drawn from Burbank church funds.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Taylor omits other actions in this vein: ordination of a woman lay elder against conference wishes; refusal to apply Adventist church-specified tests to local officers; a redefinition and very substantial broadening of the term “worship” to include, for example, waterskiing on Sabbath behind boats rented on Sabbath by Burbank church; direct giving through Burbank church to particular mission projects; and a clear deviation from Adventist doctrine in a statement of beliefs carried for years on the weekly church bulletin.<sup>4</sup>

This last point is particularly noteworthy. In 1971 a three-member Burbank church committee, divided as Burbank church itself was without animosity into a theologically conservative minority and a theologically liberal majority, produced majority and minority reports on a statement of beliefs for the bulletin.<sup>5</sup> The minority report was a paraphrase of the current *Church Manual* statement of beliefs. The majority report, however, was rather shorter and mentioned only four beliefs: “the right to worship,” “a personal God,” “a place to worship on the seventh day,” and “the belief that Christ will return.”<sup>6</sup> After strenuous debate in the general church meeting, the minority (conservative) report was printed under the heading “Seventh-day Adventists traditionally teach,” followed by the belief summaries. The majority (liberal) report was also printed, under the heading “Burbank Seventh-day Adventist Church offers.” The difference in headings was significant. The majority report represented the extent of belief assertions that the Burbank liberal wing would make; it also demonstrated the extent of Burbank’s congregationalism by its assertion that Burbank church could “offer” beliefs different from the “traditional teachings” of the Seventh-day Adventist church.<sup>7</sup>

This record shows that Burbank church was attempting to operate a congregationalist church with a relatively open internal struc-

ture — a far better description of Burbank than Dr. Taylor's artificial "participatory model." Dr. Taylor's failure to bring this out illegitimately avoided a relevant point in the debate over Adventist church government: would the church as a whole operate better or worse under a Burbank-style congregationalism, where policy and theology alike are purely, or largely, local responsibilities? Neither Dr. Taylor's article, nor any article in *Perspective*, nor any statement

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from Burbank church properly addressed this question. Burbank church thus seemed to desire to do what it wished without consideration of the effects of its example on the Adventist church generally; but this was a luxury the conference administrators could not afford. The steadily increasing congregationalism at Burbank also tended to reduce Burbank church's own openness by making it an uncomfortable place for those who did not desire a congregationalist church, however open its structure. These factors worked together to produce a gradual drop in Burbank's membership and the final events in 1974 and 1975 — which were the almost inevitable result of an attempt to use a small local church as a weapon in a battle over Adventist church order.

Though Dr. Taylor's account of the Burbank church is inadequate and distorted, it is in his analysis of present Adventist church government that Dr. Taylor most conspicuously fails to describe reality. His "sacerdotal model" (the present structure) allows for only three monolithic actors: the administrative clergy, the pastoral clergy, and the pow-

erless laymen. This description might have been accurate three decades ago; it is not accurate now.

The Adventist church now has more highly educated members than ever before, and they are linked by many networks. This situation has tended to divide Dr. Taylor's monolithic blocs along cultural and educational lines, so that a clergyman with a graduate degree in counseling, for example, often has a greater affinity with lay professionals in counseling than with other clergymen not so educated. Lines of thought have thus become far more important divisions than in the past; and these lines cross Dr. Taylor's three groups. Education also has produced a large and growing body of educated Adventist laymen — particularly practitioners of the health-related professions and teachers in Adventist institutions of higher education. The first group has significant influence on the local level in many cases through financial means, though its influence on denominational policy as a whole has been limited. The Adventist educators, however, have acquired significant policy influence in the Adventist church as a whole, bypassing Dr. Taylor's "participatory" and "sacerdotal" models (which are parish-oriented). They have this influence both directly through their own actions and indirectly through the effects of their teaching on Adventist undergraduates who will shape future policy and on current administrators who agree with them.

The direct influence of Adventist educators was apparent in the recent debate over specific statements of belief on inspiration and creation. Though these statements were strongly pressed by influential members of Dr. Taylor's "administrative clergy," they were not carried — largely due to vociferous opposition from Adventist college and university teachers. Their influence, too, was important in the formulation and passage of the statement of beliefs at the 1980 General Conference session, which stressed a progressive revelation position quite out of harmony with the idea of "preserving the landmarks." Current controversies over Dr. Desmond Ford and the authority of the Spirit of Prophecy will significantly involve and

may even turn on the views of these Adventist educators.

The indirect influence of Adventist teachers is harder to observe. Yet these teachers are often involved in presenting to students and other Adventists ideas that portray Adventism in a way often very different from recent and even current denominational precept and practice. As these ideas are absorbed they will have immense though unpredictable effects — particularly in a church where members' lives and their beliefs are so closely connected as they are in the Seventh-day Adventist church. All these effects of education escaped Dr. Taylor's analysis.<sup>8</sup>

"Prophecy," George Eliot wrote, "is the

most gratuitous form of error." Yet even in the face of such a warning, it is possible to hazard a guess. If changes in Adventist church structure are to come, they probably will do so not primarily through a direct political challenge such as Burbank church posed, but rather through the operation of ideas put forward by academics, many of whom no more intend this result than the first Adventist teachers in a one-room school intended the development of a critical Adventist historiography. Thus the Adventist church would reenact the constant tendency of man to be surprised at the effects of his own actions.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. "Creative Mind," in Dorothy L. Sayers, *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1969), p. 84.

2. This comparison was inapt and abstracted excessively from reality. The plain text of the Soviet Constitution cited by Dr. Taylor could have been a description of both American and Soviet government — which, in the light of their obvious differences, should have been a warning that it is deceptive. In any case, such formalistic comparisons often prove little about the actual operational differences between systems, particularly when the gap between theory and practice is as wide as it is for the Soviet system (on which point Alexander Solzhenitsyn is definitive). To cite only a few examples, Adventist teachers have incomparably greater freedom of thought and action than their Soviet counterparts do; ordinary Adventists have greater access to the denominational press (despite unfortunate restrictions) and to Adventist leaders than inhabitants of the Soviet Union have to the Soviet press and leadership; and despite some limiting changes passed at the 1980 General Conference, Adventists cannot be deprived of their denominational "citizenship" by the central leadership as Soviet inhabitants can. Dr. Taylor's analysis ignored the freer nature of Adventist politics, though the very existence within the Adventist Church for over a decade of a dissident Burbank church and the significant constituency opposition in 1975 to the leadership's demand for Burbank's ouster (both inconceivable under the Soviet system) should have alerted him to this fact.

3. Dr. Taylor's constant efforts to make these actions appear moderate and understandable individually were puzzling in the light of his assertion that they were revolutionary collectively.

4. This list is taken from the personal experiences of the author and from materials in his possession, particularly the Southern California Conference "Recommendation Regarding the Burbank Church" presented at the 1975 constituency meeting and the Burbank church's "Refutation of Expulsion Charges" issued after that meeting.

5. The author was himself the minority member of this committee. Like Dr. Taylor, the author was a participant-observer at Burbank Church for many years.

6. The majority report read:

#### BURBANK SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH OFFERS:

THE RIGHT TO WORSHIP: Surely God would not deny any man this right. Therefore, the only requirement for worshipping with us is the desire to do so.

THE BELIEF IN A PERSONAL GOD: Religious thinking is inherently personal and a man's relationship with God is singularly important. The full understanding of God is enhanced through the diversity of opinions. The exchange of these opinions is welcomed at Burbank.

As our name implies, A PLACE TO WORSHIP ON THE SEVENTH DAY.

As our name implies, THE BELIEF THAT CHRIST WILL RETURN.

7. A final irony at Burbank church involved this statement. On the charge of apostasy, the Burbank church's "Refutation of Expulsion Charges" cited the conservative statement as a proof of Burbank church's orthodoxy, though the vast majority of the 1975 leaders had opposed this statement in 1971 and had been instrumental then in making clear through the difference in headings that this statement did not represent Burbank church. This curiously meek and deceptive attitude was constant throughout the "Refutation," which nowhere avowed the revolutionary goals Burbank church actually pursued.

8. One reason for this omission suggests itself in the composition of Burbank church's leadership. The Burbank church board of elders in 1967, for example, included no church employees at all among its 14 members. (See "Meeting of Southern California Conference Executive Committee with the Board of Elders of the Burbank Church, May 4, 1967" [mimeographed transcript] p. [13]. At no time did Burbank church or its leadership have any important ties to Adventist higher education.