

# Prophecy Countdown: June 1997 Update

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John Osborne's ministry appears to be on the verge of collapse. This is unfortunate.

But, perhaps more unfortunate, John blames "historic Adventism" for his problems. That is a tragedy. Over the past five months (November 1996 to the present), John has repeatedly stated in newsletters, sermons, and to individuals that he no longer wants to be identified as a historic Advent believer, since those holding those beliefs are responsible for his financial downfall.

A man who makes mistakes may, through rededication to God and careful analysis of his flaws, climb back up. But when one blames his present situation on others, he is far less likely to recover himself.

No one in historic Adventism is responsible for John's present problems. Indeed, many have tried repeatedly to save him from himself, but without success. For a few minutes, let us review the past, and then briefly turn our attention to more recent events.

John and his wife Dianne operated a clothing store in Florida. But there were financial problems, and he declared bankruptcy. Then he went to college to become an Adventist minister.

Not until a very few months ago did anyone mention that such a bankruptcy had ever occurred.

As an unordained conference intern, John later pastored the Naples Seventh-day Adventist Church, located in the southeastern tip of Florida.

With the encouragement of his small church, he began local broadcasts and sending out newsletters.

Then he received an invitation to carry on his work on property owned by a historic Adventist family in central Florida.

John saw this as a basis for the expansion of his ministry, so he left the denominational ministry and

moved up to the property.

In the process, he walked away from a c. \$30-35,000 bill he had run up. The head elder of the Naples Church told me personally that they quietly paid it, although it was not right for John to leave it with them. He had the money coming in from across the nation; they were just a small congregation.

It was not until a few months ago that we mentioned it.

After John had been on the new property awhile, he got in a quarrel with the owners. They later told us (and anyone else who would listen) that he was trying, in a heavy-handed manner, to take the property away from them. Exactly what happened, we do not know.

The family sent us a sheaf of legal, and other, papers. But we said nothing about the matter.

Then John arranged to use property in the Mount Dora area, not far from Orlando. A primary problem, there, was his continual concern to rapidly buy or lease even more buildings.

Nothing was said about this financial roulette till several years later.

At about that time, an Adventist brother in the area was upset because he believed John had acted improperly. Whether or not John did, we do not know; but there are people who fully believe John did.

At any rate, when John invited the man to a restaurant to reconcile differences, John flew into a rage and struck the man. A waiter who witnessed the whole thing gave his report when the police arrived. It is on the police record, and we have a copy of it.

We never said anything.

Deep in his heart, John wanted to be ordained to the ministry; so, after opposing the organized denomination openly for a time, in 1987 he suddenly reversed himself. And, for

two years, he became very subservient to the denomination in his outlook and teachings.

At the time, it was well-known among independent ministry leaders that John wanted ordination. But church leaders stalled. In their view, John's pattern of sudden changes did not bode well for the future. John gradually became more impatient.

In spite of this remarkable reversal, historic Adventism was silent.

Then in 1989, John jumped the other way, and began vigorously attacking the denomination as "Babylon." At the same time, he urged other ministry leaders to hold an ordination service so he, John, could be ordained as a minister.

Then the ordination service was held, and we spoke up, although not referring to John or any other individuals.

Until that time, in the view of many denominational members and workers, the independent ministries were seen as those standing for historic beliefs at a time of increasing liberalism. But the ministerial ordination, generally recognized as a denominational function, diverted attention from the denominational compromises.

No longer was the situation one of simply upholding historic teachings and standards and the pointing out of liberal errors that were creeping in. Instead, the impression was given that the independents appeared to be setting up rival church structures.

As time passed, John waxed stronger and stronger in his grandiose expressions and denunciations of the denomination.

By this time, several independent ministry leaders had forsaken him. One was Joe Crews, who gave up on him when, against Joe's advice, John went ahead and married a couple who did not have Biblical grounds for so doing.

We knew of it but said nothing.

Several independent leaders still tried to work with John, even urging their own supporters to send donations to Prophecy Countdown for the purchase of the Maine shortwave station.

By this time, I was deeply concerned. In view of the record of sudden shifts and general instability that John had exhibited in the past, it seemed very unwise to place a \$5 million facility under his control.

On January 1, 1994, through another speaker on his broadcast, John condemned other independent ministries because they were not helping him.

Soon more unusual events occurred. On Sabbath, January 8, 1994, on his international broadcasts, John announced eight times that God had shown him that the entire Seventh-day Adventist denominational structure would be totally destroyed by December 31 of that year.

Because of the many complaints received, including a joint letter from four that left him the next month, the next week (January 15) John reversed himself and admitted his mistake, but did not explain “the Lord has shown me” comments of the week before.

We made no comment. Surely, the people should be able to recognize the inherent instability exhibited here.

And they did. Following John’s erratic statements on January 1, 8, and 15, many supporters withdrew from John.

Seeing that the situation was very shaky, the remaining independent ministry leaders still working with John decided that something must be done. At a special joint rally, held in southern California in February 1994 to arouse further support for the station, they gathered with John alone and discussed the matter. But John said No. It was his station, and they were not involved. They could broadcast on it, but ownership would be held by his carefully controlled board. And the board would not be enlarged.

Yet the other leaders had been responsible for raising a lot of the money which had already come in, and the cost of the station, as well as its management and program scheduling was far too much for one man to carry on. In addition, no one could know what new stance John would come out with next.

Following John’s second No at that southern California rally, the other leaders (Grosboll, Trefz, and Vierra) returned home and separated from him.

Then I spoke up—and was roundly condemned by John for having done so.

But, as I saw it, the donors needed to know more about the situation! They were mortgaging homes, selling property, and handing over life savings to help the independent ministries acquire that station. Although John had loudly said it would be for all historic Adventism to use, privately, he had told the other leaders it would be solely under his control.

In view of his past, who could know when he might jump back to subservience to the denomination; something which, a few short years later, would again happen.

The significance of the fact that all the primary independent ministry leaders had now forsaken John and his project—needed to be told to the people.

No one was doing it, so I did.

At about the time of the split, John carried out a firestorm (February 27-March 5, 1994), in which he forced out or fired a number of his workers, including two important board members. They could no longer take his self-centered, overbearing intolerance.

So I mentioned that also. The donors needed to know what was happening at the heart of the Maine project.

A couple months later, during a question and answer session, John gave another reversal. He had earlier maintained that Prophecy Countdown would return all donations for the radio station if it was not purchased. But now he said that he would not do so.

Already some donors were writing and phoning, trying to get their money back. But none was returned.

Another reversal was soon to follow. John had steadily maintained that, if the full \$5 million was not in hand by May 16, he would not buy the station.

But when that date arrived, once again John did not stand by his pledged word. He began arrangements to sign contracts to purchase it on credit.

All this was done in spite of extensive protests of faithful historic Adventists who had trusted him.

Today he says it was the historic Advent believers who were the source of all his troubles. Yet, without the historic Adventists, he would be back in that small Naples Church. They supported him because they trusted him, but he repeatedly betrayed their trust.

John then went ahead and contracted to buy the station on terms which required handing over all the money donated, about \$2 million, as the *down payment (!)*, with the total amount (\$3.8 million) to be paid, including interest (\$1.5 million), totaling about \$5.3 million. In other words, with the signing of that contract, all the donations had been swallowed up, and the full amount of the initial purchase price (\$5 million) must be paid all over again.

The donors were never permitted to have any say in the matter. John willfully did whatever he wanted.

Yet later, he would blame historic Adventists for his problems. The truth was John would let no historic Adventist close enough to save him from himself.

As negotiations to sign the contract were in progress, by July 1994 John had stopped repaying the lenders who earlier, at his request, had loaned him a large sum (believed to be over \$1 million) to purchase the trucks, Caleb and Joshua.

He had obtained that money with the solemn promise that, at any time on demand, he would return the principal. Until then, he would pay interest every month.

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But that was to be yet another promise made to historic Adventists, which John broke.

At the time, although we did not discuss that broken pledge, individual lenders were writing in and phoning, trying to get their money, but without success. They were beginning to wake up.

That particular broken promise was a sleeping giant, which would eventually take John down. And when it did, John would cast the blame on historic Adventists. It would be said that it was their obstinance which caused his troubles.

Perhaps he had a point there. Historic Adventists had an integrity which John lacked. Can two walk together, except they be agreed?

The outcome was already obvious. People had stripped their homes to send money to John, yet all they could raise was \$2 million on a \$5 million station. That should have told John something.

But John went ahead and contracted to purchase the station on payments. His monthly expenses before signing were \$39,000, including over \$6,000 to lenders. His monthly expenses after signing were \$267,000. He had accepted a hefty 10% interest rate. It was a hopeless situation, yet no one could tell John.

The Christian Science Church, with 170,000 members, could not afford the station, and John, with as many as 5,000 supporters who were gradually leaving, could not either.

Time passed. Gradually the moment of truth drew near as the financial crunch at Prophecy Countdown deepened.

But, after purchasing the station on credit, John no longer could be reached by phone.

We learned that, when people spoke with John on the phone and did not solely flatter him, he would fly into a rage. Not only was this bad on customer relations, but it would depress John for hours afterward.

So the three women leaders at Prophecy Countdown placed a communications wall around John. Orders were given that no phone calls could be transferred to him, except

from certain people.

We knew of this, but did not mention either that fact or that John required medications to keep him fairly peacable.

Throughout this time, as before, John continued firing people or causing them to be so upset with his mannerisms that they quit in disgust.

We were sent two remarkable accounts, but we never reported on either one.

In both cases, the people involved are extremely nice historic Adventists who are kind, intelligent, and very capable. We are close friends with both families.

In one instance, both the husband and wife quit because John ranted and swore.

In the other, the husband, wife, and daughter quit because John was determined to force the daughter, against her conscience, to sing bouncy, modern-style music.

We had a printed copy of both experiences in detail, but we said nothing.

We also learned that, in the preceding 12 months, 22 people had been thus ousted. We were given their names.

We said nothing. A year later, we were told that another large number had been eliminated. We made no comment.

Then there was the strange case of an egotistical boss, determined to separate an employee from his wife.

John could not tolerate opposition. All the workers were careful to keep him pacified. Their spouses and relatives were equally careful to treat John with utmost caution.

But the wife of one of John's workers was different. She had remarkably high standards and dared to speak unapprovingly of unbecoming conduct. This John could not tolerate.

So John told her husband he needed to leave his wife. That which followed was a tragedy—until the man returned to his wife and handed in his resignation.

We never reported on it. (If you wish, you can dial 352-383-9115 and ask for Hoda Hughes. She will ex-

plain what happened.)

Yet, for all John did, he now blames historic Adventism. To this day, John was never at fault; it was someone else.

Eventually the sleeping giant awakened. A faithful Advent believer in central Florida, a little south of Orlando, contacted a wide-area Orlando television station (Channel 9). This elderly lady, who lived alone, had sent her life savings (\$33,000) to John as a loan, at his televised request, to help buy the recording/transmission trucks. In return, she had received a paper stating that she would receive interest on the loan. It had been several years since John had stopped paying the interest, and he refused to return her life savings. So she contacted the television station.

Channel 9 had a history of investigative reporting, which had resulted in a number of convictions by Florida State authorities. On the second of its two broadcasts of John's activities, announcement was made by its reporter, Todd Ulrich, that the matter had been reported to the State Office.

The broadcasts were aired only a few days before a different meeting took place: the remarkable Willard Santee November 16, 1996, Sabbath at Prophecy Countdown, in which he summarily told historic Adventists everywhere that they could only be saved if their names were on the rolls of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

In a special March 1997 newsletter, John announced that he had refinanced the station on a contract twice as long. This would massively increase the interest and total cost.

John began laying plans to move to California. Details were mentioned earlier (*Osborne to California [WM-760-761]*). Meetings, in Angwin, with the Village Church occurred in mid-April.

At home, he had been sending glowing reports to donors about how he needed money because he was keeping the station. But he confidentially told members of the Angwin Village Church that he was looking for a buyer so he could sell it.

Here is the latest information on developments at Prophecy Countdown:

As you know, there are a number of individuals who loaned sizeable amounts of money to Prophecy Countdown, on the promise that they would receive regular monthly payments and be able to receive all the money back at any time they requested it.

A family in the Northwest became concerned enough about the problem that they tried to locate other lenders, in the hope that, if they petitioned John as a group, their savings might be returned to them.

When they sent out such a letter to several other lenders, Prophecy Countdown contacted them—and threatened them with a libel suit if they continued to cause trouble.

Then there is the family in Pennsylvania whose home burned down. They are now living in the hulk of the basement under very difficult conditions. The husband and wife, 72 and 68 years old, cannot rebuild because they loaned their savings to John. But he refuses to refund the loan or, as with everyone else, even pay the monthly interest payments.

On the first Sabbath (April 12) that John attended the Village Church in Angwin, California, Harold Rich, pastor of the church, told John he could speak for about 5 minutes between services.

John stood up and said, "There's only two places to be: You're in the Church or you're in Babylon!" He then used his few minutes to speak against historic Adventists who worship in meeting places separate from denominationally owned facilities.

This, of course, is exactly the message John's mentor, Willard Santee, gave at the November 1996 Prophecy Countdown Sabbath meeting, when Santee appealed to historic Adventists to submit to their local pastors—or they would go to hellfire.

Before John was finished speaking, he received a couple questions from the audience at the Angwin church. He was asked why he, John,

was carrying on a separate ministry, if it was wrong to do so. He replied that he was trying to get his members back into the Church.

He was then asked why not just tell them to watch Doug Batchelor instead of trying to broadcast himself. To this he replied, "No, I need the money to pay my bills."

Before returning to Florida, John went to Sacramento, to tentatively begin legal arrangements for corporate activity in California.

News of the planned move quickly began spreading; and, during the time that John was in California, individuals phoned Prophecy Countdown for more details—and learned that the workers there knew nothing about it.

By mid-May, John had sent word to Angwin, and was telling his workers he would be in California during the month of June for a "trial run." He planned to take the trucks with him and also a few of the staff.

Then, on Wednesday night at prayer meeting, May 21, Pastor Rich made an announcement to the Angwin Village Church. He said word had been received from Prophecy Countdown that they would not be coming to California.

He said John had said they were in very serious financial straits and that there was the possibility he might lose his home.

Mention was also made of the fact that they were being subjected to scrutiny "by the government."

We then heard that John is supposed to appear in court in the county in which Mount Dora is located (Lake County).

The next day, on Thursday, May 22, John discharged a number of the workers. A board member walked through the place and told several they could leave. Arriving at the room where the video tapes are made, the young man there was told he could stop and go home.

He replied that it would be best if he continued to work and finish processing orders already received. They had been paid for and should

be sent their tapes.

He was told not to bother; they would not be sent.

I was told that this paralleled what happened in 1988, when the people were not sent their orders either.

Those remaining at Prophecy Countdown, by the end of that day (May 22), were four board members (John, his wife Dianne, Kathleen Greenfield, and Patty Edwards), and three other workers. (Dr. Scott is also on the board, but not a salaried worker.) Six or seven other workers had been dismissed.

Back in Florida, on that same Sabbath (May 24), John told the few who attended his church service, that there would be no service there the following week. He told them to attend the Florida Conference camp meeting at Forest Lake Academy. Throughout the camp meeting, John and Dianne were there, doing their best to be accepted.

A video was made of some of the Sabbath (May 31) services at that camp meeting. We were told big drums were beaten and people swayed back and forth. It seemed like heathenism.

John blames historic Adventism for his problems, and says he no longer wants anything to do with historic Adventists.

We surely do hope and pray that our people will learn their lesson. *If you want to support any more million-dollar projects: Before you send in your money, demand that several dozen independent leaders and laymen be selected by a vote of the donors, be placed on the board of the organization controlling it, and that regular reports be mailed to the board members.*

*Everything man does is subject to error, but in a multitude of counselors there is greater likelihood of safety.*

—vf