

The Sunnyside Church Crisis

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It was only recently that I learned the details of this news item; and, although the events culminated two years ago, there are many lessons we can learn from this.

— SECTION ONE —

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

Celebrationism eats out the heart of loyalty to our denomination, its organizational authority, and its leaders.

Church leaders are gradually discovering this fact. But they are particularly concerned that it tends to stanch the flow of tithes and offerings from the celebrants.

Since the late 1980s, a number of our churches have converted to a Celebration mode of church worship: bands, drums, projected choruses, musical and dramatic skits, waving of hands, and sermons about grace which requires no obedience to God's Word.

With the passing of time, the worship style becomes wilder, and dancing and a clubhouse atmosphere takes over.

The final step is collapse of loyalty to conference authority.

Ironically, it is neither the drums and music, the confusion and wildness, nor the absence of any historic Adventist beliefs in the sermons which bothers conference leaders.

It is the fact that the Celebration church pastor, and many of his members, have stopped paying their tithe into the conference! Little else seems to matter. Very likely a given Celebration church could speak in tongues, without incurring a response from the conference office—as long as the funds kept flowing in at a regular rate.

In the later 1980s, a remarkably strong move to implant Celebrationism in the hearts of local congregations of Seventh-day Adventism in North America began.

The reason for this dangerous trend was to be found in developments which occurred earlier.

First, in the 1960s, it was urged that every Bible teacher in our colleges and universities should have a doctoral degree. But the men who had obtained those Ph.D.s had done so at a terrible price.

For several years, they had been carefully trained in outside universities under the tutelage of atheist, Protestant, or Catholic professors—who were determined to mold their thinking—or out they go.

You see, the amount of education received during the post-graduate study process (the period between the masters degree and the bestowal of the Ph.D.) is not actually a lot. This is because the study area is heavily delimited to such narrow confines that, as far as content is concerned, the doctoral student actually receives a tunnel-vision education in an extremely small area (as an example, let us say, research into Greek texts produced in the 9th century to the 13th century), and does his doctoral thesis—which makes up a sizeable portion of his research—into something even narrower (such as Greek texts from 1099 to 1187 A.D., when the crusaders controlled Jerusalem). Obviously, such studies have little relevance to real life. They surely do not help the hapless students who sit under these men in our colleges and universities—for those teachers spew out the skepticism, liberalism, and doctrinal plurality which was ingrained in them during their graduate and doctoral training.

Second, by the late 1970s, a growing number of the new pastors which had been sent out into the field had been drenched in this conglomerate of error, collectively referred to by conservatives as “the new theology.”

Some of these key points, expressed here in more direct language than its advocates care to use, would include these: (1) A salvation by grace alone, which was completed at the cross. You have been saved for 2,000 years; all you need to do to ratify it is to profess faith in Christ. (2) Behavior has noth-

ing to do with salvation, so live pretty much as you like; your profession in Christ is going to save you. (3) It is sinful to try to obey God's commandments, for then you would be engaged in "dead works." Such activity denies Christ's saving grace, and could doom you to perdition. (4) We can trust the interpretation of the Bible provided by our Bible teachers, writers, and pastors; but the interpretation provided in the Spirit of Prophecy is suspect, dangerous to the soul, and best avoided.

Third, by the mid-1980s, large numbers of faithful church members had protested in vain about the messages taught in the pulpit by their pastors. Because the conference office turned a deaf ear to their pleas, local pastors confidently punished those believers by removing them from their offices and, in various ways, silencing them.

This resulted in both a separation within the church and out of it. Some church members just clammed up and suffered silently. Discouraged from even speaking up, they withdrew while still attending church.

Others kept voicing their concerns and were either disfellowshipped or asked to have their names removed from the books.

All this produced a noticeable swing toward the liberal side—both in our churches, but also in our books and magazine articles.

As the faithful stopped supporting the denomination, leadership assumed a bunker mentality—and decided to pin their hopes on the liberals, many of whom were financially well-off.

The trashing of conservatives continued, and the liberals were given whatever they asked for.

Fourth, by the mid-1980s, all this had resulted in a rapidly decreasing inflow of funds into church coffers. In desperation, church leaders cast about for some way to remedy the situation.

Of course, all the solutions were to be found within the pages of the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy; but, scorning to be taught by such humble means,—our leaders went afield to see what methods were being used by the other churches.

One possibility was the "church growth" movement, started at Fuller Theological Seminary in southern California. So our leaders called in Protestant "church growth" experts. Experts were hired to go to a few of our larger churches to train members how to go out and interview other members and reorient their thinking.

One church growth seminar, held in Atlanta at about that time, was especially interesting. While the other "church growth" experts studied the fast-

est-growing congregations, scattered here and there in the country, this Protestant researcher had investigated the causes of rapid growth *as found in entire denominations*. He told our leaders at that meeting that he had found, quite consistently, that the denominations which were growing the fastest (Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.)—were the ones which had special beliefs and standards, and required strict obedience from their members!

Conservatism, not liberalism, was the answer. But our leaders did not catch the message.

Still casting about for solutions, they studied the practices of the fastest-growing local congregations in America and overseas. Many of these were quasi-Pentecostal or worse. But it mattered not; they were having success! And the standard of "success" was not purity of doctrine, high moral standards, or adherence to historic principles and practices,—but an increase in church membership and, hopefully with it, more dollar bills when the plates were passed. This was the coveted objective.

Obviously, an earnest Christian can see that it is not wise to base success on an increase of numbers! If we held NASCAR auto races in connection with our church services, there is no doubt that we could greatly increase attendance! A gambling casino in back of each church would surely help with the numbers problem.

It is not quantity but quality that God wants in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination today, and that is what we should strive for.

Why are we here? What are we supposed to be doing? Our leaders need to rethink some basics. Along with this, they need to ask themselves, "Where are we taking the people?"

The broad road leads to hellfire. There is no lack of numbers on that pathway. I would not wish to answer in the judgment for some of the decisions which men have been making.

Fifth, in the late 1980s, new methods for increasing attendance and church growth were tried.

LAB training, NLP classes, and meditation were started, but they only frightened more church members into leaving.

At about the same time, our leaders stumbled upon another possible solution. Church growth seminars were not working very well,—but a capable West Coast pastor came up with a great, new idea: Celebrationism.

Trained as an actor, David Snyder had later become an Adventist pastor. While pastoring the Milwaukie Church, on the south side of Portland, Oregon, he spent a lot of time visiting high growth-rate Protestant churches. He found that the Pente-

costals were doing especially well.

You see, the key to Celebrationism is excitement. Worldlings are not interested in going to church to worship God or to strengthen their faith in doctrines and standards. They want action, excitement, something different. They want church service to approximate the excitement they watch on television throughout the week.

Snyder had found a key to increased attendance: Ape the wild music and emotional fervor found in the quasi-Pentecostal churches. Carefully copying what he found, it began producing success. His church rapidly grew to several hundred members. Officials at the Oregon Conference office (not far away in Portland) were impressed, and they gave him the go-ahead signal.

But other eyes were also focused on his work. Leaders at the General Conference shared the anxiety of lower-level church officials. Ways needed to be found to increase the inflow of funds.

The trademark lawsuits, especially the ones against the Hawaii church and Kinship, had emptied several million dollars out of General Conference funds. The situation was becoming precarious. (So much so, that, in the early 1990s, an annual council was to drastically cut the budget allotted to the General Conference. The brethren felt that, if world headquarters could go through that much money so fast, they did not need as much in the future.)

So David Snyder's experiment at Milwaukie was given prominence. Indeed, church leaders on the highest levels decided that it deserved some very special attention. Every conference president in North America was contacted and urged to send pastors to Milwaukie for a special week-long training session. While there, each pastor would take part in two Sabbath services, along with receiving careful instruction in the "principles" of Celebrationism.

Letters, which we received here, made it obvious to us that it was the most liberal pastors in the conferences which were selected for the paid-in-full journey to the Milwaukie Church for this special training.

With a desperate financial picture before them, our leaders were determined to bring in more members. If Pentecostalism was the answer, so be it.

This, of course, was a terrible decision. If you will read the first booklet in my *End-Time Series* on last-day events (the most complete, classified collection of Spirit of Prophecy statements on final events every compiled), you will learn that it will be an "excitement in the churches" which will be the first step in thrusting us into the Sunday Law.

For our leaders to try to force this excitement on our churches is treason in the extreme. Yet it was done.

At about that time, we began seeing "*Celebration*" as the magic word for most every kind of announced gathering or retreat—whether youth, senior, young adult, musical, or whatever. Everything was called "*Celebration*." (The subhead often used was the word, "*Festival*.") But both words are worldly. In our modern world they consistently identify very worldly gatherings. A primary exception is the Roman Catholic use of the word, to describe their services, which the Pentecostals in recent years have picked up.

(If you will check on the meaning of the original word for "*celebrate*" in the Bible; the word had a far different meaning in 1611 when the King James revisers wrote "ye shall celebrate your Sabbaths.")

Over the years, a surprising number of Adventist churches which have gone heavily into Celebrationism,—have collapsed in one way or the other.

Some tore apart from the sheer worldly excitement of that worship environment.

That is what eventually happened to Dave Snyder's church. Certain events split the entire church;—and the Oregon Conference was left with a large loan to pay off—on a church which had collapsed. (Dave Snyder left Adventism entirely, and now pastors a Protestant church.)

We have reported on how a majority of members in several other Celebration-type churches have, with their pastors, left the denomination and started separate churches. It is ironic that Celebration churches were started to bring in more people from the world, but are ending by taking members out of denomination. We have written about several such local congregations in the past year or so.

It was only recently that I learned the sequel to the Milwaukie Church story. Although that sequel climaxed a couple years ago, it has lessons worth our consideration. We continue to face the same problems and challenges today.

— SECTION TWO —

THE SUNNYSIDE CHURCH

When Snyder's Milwaukie Church collapsed, some of the church members left the denomination entirely while others began attending the Sunnyside Church, located elsewhere in the Portland, Oregon, area.

When they arrived at Sunnyside, senior pastor, Bob Bretsch decided to begin simultaneous services: one somewhat more traditional and the other Celebration. This second one was given the name,

“The Praise Service.”

Once again there was growth, as liberals from area Adventist churches transferred to Sunnyside to enjoy the excitement. Portland is a large city, and Celebration churches only show impressive growth in large urban areas where lukewarm Adventists can be attracted from surrounding areas. All that really happens is a shuffling of members from one church to the other; but, in the process, the standards of many are lowered. The result is ultimately loss, not gain.

Because people were intent on excitement, Bretsch cast about for different ideas to maintain their interest. In 1993, he was preaching a series on “new ways to praise God,” when he met some Messianic Jews. You will recall a recent study, in which we described the beliefs and worship practices of these groups. They accept Christ as their Saviour while mingling a portion of Jewish ritualism with their faith.

Bretsch invited them to perform a traditional Jewish worship dance at the close of one of his sermons. The rustling skirts of the women, the weaving and turning of the dancers, as they sang their folk tunes fascinated the audience. This was great! A wonderful new way to praise God, they said.

So Bretsch asked the group to begin weekly dance classes for the church members. Soon many were dancing before the audience every Sabbath morning.

This was excitement that thrilled everyone. It was said that, surely, the presence of the Lord is in this place.

Yet, as you and I are well-aware, the people were not being prepared for heaven by those dances, the Pentecostal worship services, the drums and music, and all the new theology messages about grace without obedience to God’s Word.

What did the conference office, only a few miles away, think about all this? Surely, it would seem that the conference president would enter the auditorium and declare, “This bedlam is more like Aaron’s worship audience dancing in the valley than like Moses worshiping God in the mount.”

But, no. The conference president was pleased that attendance was high. Neither the union conference, the North American Division, nor the General Conference complained either.

All was well. There was evidence of growth, and that was what mattered.

But one thing did concern the conference of-

ference. No, it was not the changed doctrines, the worldly worship, the leavened experiences. It was one little fact: Bob Bretsch, the senior pastor, had not followed conference policy in regard to his own tithe.

For a time, he had diverted it to other things for a time. Later, he began sending it to the Montana Conference.

We do not know why he did that, although it is likely he knew a little too much about how tithe was being used in the Oregon Conference.

At any rate, Bretsch had been found disobedient to church policy. Wrong doctrine and dancing in the aisles mattered not. That which counted was loyalty to the organization. On that point, and that point alone, the conference office entered the picture.

Although Alf Birch, president of the Oregon Conference, was determined to get rid of Bretsch,—neither he nor the rest of the conference staff was concerned about anything else that went on at Sunnyside.

We have shepherds who do not care for the sheep. That is a tragedy. I would not want to be in the shoes of one of those silent shepherds in the day of Judgment.

People are going to perish because of what is taking place in these liberal Adventist congregations and in conservative ones forced to listen week after week to modernist pastors.

On May 30, 1997, when Bretsch was fired by the Oregon Conference Executive Committee, a sizeable number of members soon after left with him. The result was a split-off, independent church, called the Bridge City Community Church. Within a week, the Sunnyside associate pastor, Duff Gorte, quit and aligned himself with Bridge City.

The crises in our church continue, as leaders refuse to lead our people back to our historic positions. It seems as if there is a lethargy upon them.

What is all this leading to? When will it all end?

Fortunately, we have the answers within the pages of the book, *Great Controversy*.

Study the Inspired books; cling to them; and, in the enabling grace of Christ, obey them—and they will lead you all the way into the City of God.

The God of heaven has promised that He will honor His Word and those who, by His grace, obey it. How thankful we can be that we have such Inspired guidance!

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