

Burnside, George

(1908–1994)

LESTER DEVINE

Originally trained as a secondary history teacher, a career long Adventist educator, Lester Devine, Ed.D., has taught at elementary, secondary and higher education levels and spent more than three decades in elected educational leadership positions in two divisions of the world Church, NAD (1969-1982) and SPD (1982-2005). He completed his forty years of denominational service with a term as director of the Ellen G. White/Adventist Research Centre at Avondale University College in Australia where his life-long hobby of learning and presenting on Adventist heritage issues became his vocation.

George Burnside was one of the most successful evangelists of his time in the South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Early Life and Marriage

George Burnside was born in Christchurch, New Zealand, on September 6, 1908, just six weeks after his Presbyterian parents, John and Helen (Inglis) Burnside, and his older sister, Mary, had arrived in New Zealand as immigrants from Scotland. George's younger siblings, Helen, Tom, and Peggy were born in New Zealand.¹ George Burnside grew up in the community of Harihari on the southwest coast of the South Island of New Zealand. After leaving school he worked as a carpenter and while visiting relatives in Christchurch was encouraged to attend meetings where James William Kent (universally known as J. W. Kent) was preaching on prophecy. George Burnside attended with the intent of proving the speaker wrong but, in time, came under conviction and, with his family, joined the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church at 17 years of age.²

Burnside decided he needed more education so in 1928 he enrolled at Longburn College, the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) training college in New Zealand. After two years at Longburn, at the end of 1929, George became a colporteur selling books door-to-door. It was a difficult experience, but working through heavy rain and snow too deep to ride his bicycle, sleeping in sheds, and eating boiled wheat developed in him a strong resolve to see a task through to its completion.³ He returned to Longburn College in 1931 to prepare for ministry and then spent 1932 and 1933 at Avondale College in Australia working toward completing the ministerial



George Burnside

Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

course. However, Burnside did not graduate because some of the required subjects in the course did not interest him. He chose other subjects which he thought would be more valuable in his work. He spent 1935 as a colporteur on the New South Wales Central Coast before being appointed to ministerial work in the Maryborough area of Queensland in 1936.⁴

Burnside had earlier met Sheillah Lewin (who had been born in Eltham, New Zealand on April 18, 1908) when they were both students at Longburn College and on his appointment to ministerial work in Queensland, they agreed to marry.⁵ Sheillah travelled by the Union steamship *Wanganella* to Australia arriving in January 1936.⁶ She then journeyed north to Maryborough where she and George were married on February 3, 1936. They spent their honeymoon at Hervey Bay, not relaxing on the beach but running their first evangelistic campaign which resulted in the establishment of the Hervey Bay Church. Burnside continued in evangelism transferring to Tasmania at the beginning of 1938.⁷ While in Tasmania, he pioneered the utilisation of radio in evangelism, broadcasting over station 7LA, Launceston, each Sunday evening.⁸ He was ordained in Hobart, Tasmania on February 10, 1940.⁹

In January 1942, George and Sheillah Burnside transferred to the North New Zealand Conference. It was here that daughter Lorelley Helen was born in Lower Hutt, on January 10, 1945.¹⁰ Evangelism continued as the focus of Burnside's life working in North New Zealand until 1948 and then in South New Zealand in 1949. Throughout his career he worked not only in North and South New Zealand but in most states in Australia as well.

Years of Public Evangelism

During his term in New Zealand, Burnside interrupted his evangelistic program in 1946 to attend the SDA Seminary in Washington, D.C. He also traveled throughout Europe before returning to evangelism in New Zealand. After a particularly successful evangelistic series in Christchurch, George and his family transferred to Australia in 1950 and ran another very successful series of meetings in the Adelaide Town Hall in South Australia. The next year was particularly challenging. He conducted a series in the city of Newcastle in New South Wales. Despite the tent being twice blown down in bad weather, 150 people were baptized. One member of his evangelistic team was the young Desmond Ford who was in his first year of ministry. Ford's polite objections in staff meetings to some of the content of Burnside's lectures was a new experience for the leading evangelist of the time in the South Pacific region, and he found Ford's questions hard to answer. This was the beginning of Burnside's increasing concern in subsequent years with what was being taught at Avondale to young ministers in training. He became particularly concerned about the preaching on righteousness by faith of the increasingly prominent Desmond Ford.¹¹

In 1953, Burnside conducted an evangelistic series in Brisbane followed the next year by one in the Sydney Town Hall where "the opposition was intense," and the press "gave him enormous adverse publicity." Pressing on in spite of all the headwinds he had experienced, Burnside was gratified to find the hall packed for the initial

meetings by people who wanted to hear this colourful character they had heard and read so much about.¹²

Burnside spent some of 1954 travelling abroad as a part of his continuing education. In 1955 he became the speaker for the Australian Voice of Prophecy radio program, broadcasting on 60 stations across Australia. With his busy radio ministry Burnside started running shorter three-week evangelistic programs. These proved successful. At the evangelistic program in Perth in a “huge tent”, Burnside spent the days training local pastors in evangelism as well as being the speaker each evening.¹³ Being the Voice of Prophecy speaker, he was able to access the equipment to make vinyl records of his sermons for distribution to pastors and lay evangelists alike. Thus with Burnside’s modelling influence, many young ministers were inspired to run their own evangelistic outreach programs.

In 1957, Burnside was elected the Ministerial Secretary for the Australasian Division and continued in that role for 14 years.¹⁴ This role provided him with the opportunity to train young pastors in the island nations of the South Pacific in evangelism, and thousands of Pacific Islanders became Seventh-day Adventists as a result. As Ministerial Secretary, Burnside continued to run three-week evangelistic series across Australia and New Zealand. Always a speaker in demand, he delivered the Friday night sermon at the 1967 General Conference session in Detroit, Michigan. When not re-elected to his post at the Division office, Burnside’s final denominational employment was as the Lay Activities Director for the Greater Sydney Conference for one year, after which he retired in 1973 after 40 years and 9 months of service.¹⁵

A characteristic of Burnside’s evangelistic approach had always been his openly critical assessment of Roman Catholicism specifically and other “apostate” Protestant denominations generally in his preaching. Not all Seventh-day Adventists noticed this or objected to it. Always controversial in the wider community, there was never any doubt that Burnside did not mind offending people if for no other reason than that community controversy built attendance at his crusades. But with time, some within the Church became increasingly uncomfortable with Burnside’s antagonism toward other faith communities. They began to wonder if such an approach was counter-productive, and if indeed the days of Burnside’s aggressive style of public evangelism were coming to an end.¹⁶

The Challenge of Later Years

Burnside’s later years were challenging. Initially led by the mentor of his youth, J.W. Kent, a group of senior and mostly retired pastors, including Burnside, dialogued with the leadership of the Church in the South Pacific about their concerns regarding the direction they saw the Church taking and they called themselves the “Concerned Brethren”. George’s deep involvement with the issues surrounding the Concerned Brethren, and his aggressive criticism of denominational leadership led to him being denied the right to preach in Adventist pulpits across the Division. Since much of the tension generated by the Concerned Brethren initially centred on the teachings of Desmond Ford, George Burnside along with his concerned colleagues were relieved when

Ford's employment with the denomination was terminated in 1980.

Burnside felt vindicated by Ford's dismissal, and this gave him a new lease on life at this point in his retirement years. During this time Burnside remained active in ministry despite not having access to church pulpits. In particular, young people would crowd into his home on Sabbath afternoons. These meetings encouraged some to train for ministry.¹⁷ But Burnside struggled in his retirement. He became concerned with changes in the church in the South Pacific, specifically with teachings he considered to be erroneous. He was also reluctant to accept advice from fellow clergy who did not share his concerns and advised him to take a lower profile. A renewed focus of concern for Burnside in his final years was the issue of Bible translations, and he was determined in his promotion of the King James Version as the only acceptable translation. Sadly, the former leading evangelist in the South Pacific was, over time, losing both his audience and his reputation within the Adventist faith community.

Final Years and Summary of Service

Burnside conducted his last evangelistic campaign in 1989. Speaking in the Divine service every second Sabbath, he still energised the congregation, but becoming increasingly frail, he had to sit for the final presentations.¹⁸ He died on March 20, 1994.¹⁹

Burnside's years of full-time service for the Seventh-day Adventist Church are summarised as follows:

Jan 1930 – Dec 1930	South NZ Conference	Colporteur	1 yr
Jan 1934 – Dec 1934	Tasmanian Conference	Colporteur	1 yr
Jan 1935 – Dec 1937	Queensland Conference	Evangelist	3 yrs
Jan 1938 – Dec 1941	Tasmanian Conference	Evangelist	4 yrs
Jan 1942 – Dec 1948	North NZ Conference	Evangelist	7 yrs
Jan 1949 – Dec 1949	South NZ Conference	Evangelist	1 yr
Jan 1950 – Dec 1950	South Australia Conference	Evangelist	1 yr
Jan 1951 – Dec 1951	North NSW Conference	Evangelist	1 yr
Jan 1952 – Dec 1954	Queensland Conference	Evangelist	3 yrs
Jan 1955 – Dec 1956	Australasian Division	Radio Sec.	2 yrs
Jan 1957 – Dec 1970	Australasian Division	Ministerial Sec.	14 yrs
Jan 1971 – Dec 1972	Greater Sydney Conference	Lay Evangelism Sec.	2 yrs
Jan 1973 – Sep 1973	Greater Sydney Conference	Evangelist	9 mths

This is a total of 40 years and 9 months of service.²⁰

It has been estimated that Burnside's evangelist campaigns were responsible for the baptisms of more than 4,000 individuals. This makes him the most successful evangelist the church in the South Pacific had witnessed during his lifetime.²¹

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"We are happy to announce . . ." *Australasian Record*, April 17, 1939.

NOTES

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3. Price, "Life Sketch."
4. Ibid.
5. George Burnside Biographical Information Blank, Archives of the South Pacific Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Wahroonga, New South Wales, Australia; Folder: "Burnside, George;" "Document: Biographical Information Blank."
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7. Burnside, George Personal Service Record, Archives of the South Pacific Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Wahroonga, New South Wales, Australia; Folder: "Burnside, George;" Document: "Personal service Record."
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17. Manners, 10.

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19. Ibid.

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21. Price, "Life Sketch."

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