



STATEMENT DW030

THE WHITE LIE
by Walter Rea
(M. & R. Publications, Turlock, California 1981)

Since its inception through the influence of its visionary founder Ellen G. White, Seventh-Day Adventism has been fraught with dissension and controversy. Presently, Adventism finds itself amidst an unprecedented theological crisis stimulated by the recent scholarship of several of its prominent pastors and theologians. This scholarship has posed a threat to the leadership due to the damaging evidence now being uncovered, significantly undermining many cherished pillars of Adventist faith. To date, the crisis has precipitated the defrocking of nearly 100 Adventist pastors, sending shock waves which are being felt by the mainstream evangelical community. As one Adventist pastor observed, the church is experiencing an identity crisis in its adolescence as it grapples with the growing pains of theological evolution.

Against the emotionally charged backdrop of this theological rift, Walter Rea's book, *The White Lie*, makes its volatile debut. Rea, formerly pastor of a large Seventh-Day Adventist congregation in Long Beach, was dismissed after making public the results of his extensive research on the literary dependence of his church's prophetess and leading figure, Ellen White. *The White Lie* records the most comprehensive investigation yet into the widely debated integrity of Mrs. White's prophetic gift, allegedly of divine origin, which has produced some 53 volumes. It is these highly esteemed writings that Adventists have turned to for over a century for spiritual inspiration and doctrinal direction.

The current theological tension has polarized around two dominant doctrinal Issues: (1) the inspiration and authority of Ellen G. White, and (2) the issue of justification by faith. Recently, the latter issue has been given attention by the scholarship of the now-defrocked Adventist theologian Desmond Ford, whose research focused on the hotly-debated "sanctuary" doctrine. Ford, who formerly enjoyed the widespread respect of his denomination, challenged the veracity of the doctrine, which he believes has no biblical support and has served to obscure the essential New Testament tenet of justification by faith.

In brief, the controversial sanctuary doctrine is based on Mrs. White's reinterpretation of what happened in 1844, at the time of the "Great Disappointment" of the Millerite movement when Christ failed to appear as predicted to cleanse the earthly sanctuary of sin. As a result of her vision, Mrs. White promoted the teaching that instead of Christ's return to earth in 1844, the prediction was referring to His relocation from one "apartment" of the heavenly sanctuary into another. This move was supposed to initiate an "investigative judgment" of believers' works prior to Christ's Second Coming. Significantly, it was this interpretation which became the basis for Ellen White's role in establishing Seventh-Day Adventism as a distinctive denominational entity, as she enabled the disillusioned Millerite group to save face.

Concurrent with Ford's theological challenge to traditional Adventist doctrine. Walter Rea's polemic is fueling the fires of controversy. Riding on the wake of Ford's eye-opening scholarship, Rea hopes his own scholastic efforts will benefit from an increased intellectual curiosity amongst Adventists. Rea has concentrated his research on Mrs. White's inspiration and authority, specifically determining to prove that the "Spirit of Prophecy," as her purported gift is called, is not of divine origin.

An overwhelming amount of evidence has been gathered by Rea to substantiate his conviction that the prophetess' message did not originate in heaven, but was compiled with the aid of several close associates and family members. Page upon page of double-column comparisons of Mrs. White's material alongside the writings of various religious

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authors (many of them her 19th-century contemporaries) are interspersed throughout the book. Examples of some of the most notable appropriations are from Alfred Edersheim's *Elisha the Prophet*, William Hanna's *The Life of Christ*, and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Rea effectively pleads his case from evidence presented in the form of a series of legal exhibits such as would be submitted by a prosecuting attorney in a court of law. These comparisons are most impressive in demonstrating the vast extent of Mrs. White's plagiarism in which she relied heavily on the use of paraphrasing, compilation, and unequivocal copying. *The White Lie's* comparative analysis includes seventeen authors' works which reveal marked similarities to the corresponding White text. In a word, the evidence for Mrs. White's plagiarism is devastating.

Without any reluctance, Rea demonstrates the glaring inconsistencies between Ellen's borrowing (which has been known by the SDA leadership) and her own adamant denials of any human intervention in her work. This discrepancy has brought great embarrassment to the White Estate (the official guardian of Ellen's sacred literature), which has struggled to reconcile these presumptuous pronouncements by their formerly infallible visionary with the now openly acknowledged evidence of her literary dependency.

Rea's penetrating exposé reveals the feeble attempts by the White Estate to protect their founder (and, consequently, their religious empire). Rea addresses one of the most implausible defenses being offered — namely, that her borrowings were largely a product of her photographic memory, with which she unconsciously recorded the writings of others and then later inadvertently reproduced them as her own God-inspired revelations. This argument Rea refutes as particularly weak in light of Mrs. White's scanty education (which was due to a childhood head injury and continued, debilitating physical afflictions that are documented in her personal medical history). Another defense put forth by the SDA hierarchy is that Ellen's writings were compiled in the same manner as that of the biblical writers. Rea presents a concise, but thorough, refutation of this premise.

In his thoroughness, Rea does not fail to probe into two highly inflammatory political issues that currently face the denomination. He traces the misappropriation of church funds in the recent Davenport scandal, as well as the disfellowshipping of several key scholars who dared to oppose traditional Adventist theology and could not be kept from creating waves with the distressing evidence they had uncovered. Assigning the responsibility for the authorship of the "White Lie" to James White, Ellen's husband. Rea documents the White posterity's faithfulness in preserving the legacy of the "lie" after the death of their revered relative.

The ousted clergyman also probes into the controversy and speculation surrounding Mrs. White's mental health. Rea sets forth the possibility that her head injury (incurred at the age of nine), along with its subsequent physiological complications, may account for the recurring visions that were nearly always accompanied by a "divinely" inspired message.

The White Lie's author employs the cynical phrase "the super-salesmen of the psychic," a recurring theme that is woven throughout the fabric of the treatise. These "supersalesmen" dispense their spiritually deceptive wares to the unsuspecting and gullible religious masses, preying upon the guilt of their victims in order to peddle their product of fear. The book is also caustic in its criticism of organized religion, maintaining that it has served to all but destroy the work of God, whose message has been revamped by the clever manipulation of the "saints" who are puppets of the supersalesmen.

Rea's disillusionment with the prophetess of Adventism leads him to classify her with such well-known cult leaders as Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, and others who became, in effect, a "filter" of divine truth for their followers. In making this association with cultism, Rea demonstrates Mrs. White's role as the final, infallible interpreter of Scripture for the denomination. The author charges that just as the Jews were blinded by a "veil of salvation by works," so have the Adventists succumbed to a similar spiritual malady through their blind allegiance to a legalistic system that Christ rendered obsolete at the cross. In Rea's words, "... Ellen became the veil that hid Christ from the people."

The Christian Research Institute concurs with Rea's conclusion that the time has arrived for the Adventist leadership to finally come to terms with the authority they've ascribed to their founder, an authority which has been cloaked with the guise of divine inspiration. We agree here with Walter Rea in pressing for a clear statement by the SDA officials of their position on this essential issue. If the denomination is to withstand the scrutiny of current scholarship and the onlooking evangelical community, the implications of this controversy must be faced squarely and biblically.

It is certain that *The White Lie* will be met with widespread antagonism and debate, especially in light of the initial scare tactics employed by the SDA hierarchy in promoting *Omega*, a recent book by attorney and Adventist spokesman Lewis Walton. With *Omega's* skillful use of innuendo, seeds of fear have been planted throughout the church, since it alludes to the possibility that the present theological crisis may be the forerunner of the apostasy Ellen White had predicted would occur in the latter days. Nevertheless, once the smoke of opposition has cleared, the curiosity of many Adventists will stir them to read the censured book despite earnest warnings by the threatened old guard.

Rea's polemic stands in glaring judgment of cultism in its various subtle forms, especially that of aberrational Christian movements. Adherents of such groups who are fortunate enough to acquire this work are sure to be greatly disturbed by the severe warning the author sounds. *The White Lie* should also be of interest to Christian apologists and to those involved in cult evangelism.

The tone and format of *The White Lie* are certain to intimidate some, and although the book's scholarship is thorough, it is hurt by overstatements and a seemingly bitter cynicism which may undermine its objectivity in the minds of readers. Despite these limitations, those who endure Rea's pessimism will have gained a valuable behind-the-scenes insight into the development of a religious empire and its unlikely central figure.

Written in the style of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, the book is both a condemnation of abusive leadership and a cry of warning to believers who have unquestioningly submitted themselves to such leaders. It charges that they have controlled their flocks with fear and guilt in order to maintain allegiance to their ecclesiastical empires.

Rea's exhortation to Adventists to return to their first love ought to strike a deep note of conviction in all believers who have made idols of their leaders. May we have the courage to learn from the painful lesson of our Adventist brethren and refuse to embrace the false security of allegedly infallible spiritual leadership, and to purge our churches of their influence so that we may clearly perceive our Lord and His gospel in all their purity.