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Religion: The Church of Liberal Borrowings

By Richard N. Ostling; Dick Thompson; Jim Castelli

Plagiarism and fraud charges rock the Seventh-day Adventists

The 3.8 million-member Seventh-day Adventist Church is normally the most doctrinally placid and prosperous of faiths. Lately, however, it has fallen into unaccustomed uproar. For starters, church members are suing Adventist officials in an Oregon court for fraud and breach of fiduciary trust, stemming from the 1981 bankruptcy of fellow Adventist Donald Davenport, a Los Angeles developer. The suit charges that without adequately checking Davenport out, Adventist clergy blithely invested church trust funds with him and urged church members to make their own investments. As his empire collapsed, Davenport supposedly used newly raised moneys to cover payments due to previous investors. In the end, church agencies dropped a cool \$21 million, and individual Adventists may be out as much as \$20 million in the debacle. On top of this, the church has been hit by a second scandal: the charge that the theological writings of its most important figure, which rank second only to the Bible, may have been plagiarized from other authors.

Of the two scandals, the second could prove the costlier, as it calls into question the integrity of the church's teachings. Prophet Ellen G. White (1827-1915) rallied the group that became known as the Adventists following the "Great Disappointment" of Oct. 22, 1844, the date when thousands of Protestants expected the Second Coming (or Advent) of Jesus Christ to occur. When it did not, White, a "messenger" of God and interpreter of the Bible, said she received a vision explaining that on Oct. 22 Christ had entered a new "sanctuary" in heaven to begin "investigative judgment" of the lives and works of believers. Then White reported a second vision that confirmed the necessity of Saturday worship (hence the name Seventh-day Adventists). Followers came to regard White's numerous visions and books as divinely inspired interpretations of the Bible, as well as a guide to proper views on everything from vegetarianism (pro) to Darwinism (con).

Now a growing number of Adventists are having their doubts about White's teachings. In the late 1970s, Desmond Ford, a prominent Australian theologian who was teaching at the church-run Pacific Union College in California, made the case that White's "sanctuary" explication of 1844 no longer stood up in the light of the Bible, and that "investigative judgment" undercut the whole basis of Protestantism: belief in salvation by God's grace apart from good works. This prompted the founding of a dissident bimonthly, *Evangelica*, based in Napa, Calif. Before long, the church forced the resignation or expulsion, by one count, of 120 Adventist clergy and teachers. Ford was defrocked in 1980.

Ford's challenge was mild, however, compared with the bombshell dropped by Walter T. Rea of Patterson, Calif. A veteran pastor, Rea, in the course of Ph.D. research, stumbled across some long-buried writings by forgotten divines that matched huge swatches of Prophet White's books. Accusations of this general nature had arisen before but had been argued away by Adventist but had been argued away by Adventist officials. Rea was the first to document the vast scale of such borrowing (from 75 assorted books on history, doctrine and the Bible). Last April, Rea issued his full findings in a bitter book titled *The White Lie*. In it he concludes that the "plagiarism" undermines belief not only in the prophet's divine inspiration but also in her basic honesty. One Adventist, Delbert Hodder, a pediatrician and teacher at the University of Connecticut, has offered an altogether different explanation. When White was nine years old she was hit in the head by a rock and seriously injured. Hodder speculates that her visions were the result of "partial-complex seizure," a malady related to epilepsy.

Prodded by Rea, the church has been forced to give ground. Last month, *Ministry*, its magazine for clergy, conceded that White's use of "outside sources" was "much more extensive" than Adventists have realized. Admitted *Ministry*: "Sometimes she used material nearly word for word without giving credit." Most shocking of all, "She utilized the words of prior authors in describing words she heard spoken while in vision. In a few instances, she uses the writings of a 19th century source in quoting the words of Christ or of an angelic guide."

Despite these admissions, Church President Neal Wilson holds to the position that a prophet's thoughts can be divinely inspired even though they are not original. And loyal Adventists have taken to defending White's plagiarism as acceptable practice, arguing that parts of the Bible too were compiled from pre-existing sources. The church's last General Conference, in 1980, confirmed White as a latter-day prophet whose "writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth." and authoritative source of truth."

A full report on the church's investigation of White's sources is due next year. Meanwhile, in the second edition of his book Rea plans to charge that White's last and most important works were actually fabricated by Adventist pioneers when she was senile. Whatever the outcome, Georgetown University Ethicist Roy Branson, editor of *Spectrum*, an independent journal for church liberals, says flatly that Adventists will no longer be able to appeal to White as "the final authority on a whole range of issues, including biblical and theological interpretation and life-style." If so, the Seventh-day Adventists would seem to have lost a resource more precious than the millions that went down the drain. —By Richard N. Ostling. Reported by Jim Castelli/Washington and Dick Thompson/San Francisco

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