

## Lewis Walton and SDA Fundamentalism

Lewis Walton, *Omega* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assoc., 1981), 96 pp. \$6.50 (paper); *Decision at the Jordan* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assoc., 1982), 93 pp. \$5.95 (paper); *Advent* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Assoc., 1986), 95 pp., \$6.95 (paper); *How to Survive the Eighties* (Mountain View, Ca.: Pacific Press Publishing Assoc., 1983), 128 pp., \$.50 (paper).

Reviewed by Alex Lian

During the 1970s the Seventh-day Adventist church reeled under a number of internal blows to its official teachings that resulted in great confusion and consternation for many of its members. Two of the church's core beliefs, the doctrine of the sanctuary and the prophetic ministry of Ellen White, were subjected to trenchant criticism by scholars and ministers within the denomination; the former most notably by the Australian theologian Desmond Ford, and the latter by an SDA pastor, Walter Rea (*The White Lie*, 1982), and Ronald Numbers (*Prophetess of Health: Ellen G. White*, 1976), a historian now at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Adventist historian Gary Land, in commenting on these episodes, placed them in the context of an ongoing tension since the 1960s within the Adventist community. He contrasted those who want the denomination to follow its historical pattern of cultural isolation and remain a sect, and those who desire the denomination to move closer to and interact with mainline conservative Protestant churches. Such accommodation would include,

among other things, coming to terms with mainline Protestant theological thinking. According to Land, "What had been a sectarian and in many ways fundamentalist theology appeared [in the 1960s] to be moving toward conservative Protestantism, though that movement was facing a strong reaction."

The issue most clearly destined to receive a battering by such a movement within the church would be the role and function of Ellen White within the Adventist community. Due to the work of Rea and Numbers, questions had already arisen concerning the nature of White's inspiration, and in some minds, whether she was divinely inspired or not.

In response to Ford, Rea, Numbers, and those who wished to change the church's sect-mentality, a corps of men arose to defend what many Adventists term "traditional Adventism." Forming the vanguard of such defenders are Lewis Walton, Kenneth Wood, Herbert Douglass, and most recently, that *enfant terrible* Kevin Paulson, who, with his book *Coming to Terms*, has emerged as a theological watchdog for the younger generation. As these men view it, the Adventist church must never deviate from its historical beliefs. The truths proclaimed by the pioneers must not be compromised or de-emphasized, but must always act as the guiding lights for Adventists everywhere at all times. Moreover, for these defenders a traditional understanding of the inspiration and authority of Ellen White is of paramount importance, for to deny her validity in any manner is tantamount to rejecting God's instructions for the present age.

In 1981 the publication of Lewis Walton's *Omega* marked a major counterattack against the so-called "liberals" (men like Ford, Rea, and Numbers) and simultaneously catapulted Walton to the forefront of the fray. A lawyer and writer from Northern California, Walton sought to recount in *Omega* the trials faced by the Adventist church during the early part of this century, which, according to Ellen White, once again would face the church in the last days before the Second Coming. Consequently, Walton exhorted

Adventists to stay faithful to the teachings of the church, listen to the warnings of the prophet, and not allow the enervating speculations of human reason to sway them from God's Word.

From all appearances Walton was extremely successful in gaining a hearing from a large portion of the Adventist population. *Omega* went through an initial printing of seven editions totaling more than 70,000 copies and continues to sell approximately 800 copies a year. Since 1981 Walton has published three more books dealing with some aspect of Adventist history or theol-

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ogy. In 1982 he coauthored with Herbert Douglass *How to Survive the Eighties*, the missionary book of the year (200,000 initial printing, 200-400 annual run); also in 1982 he published *Decision at the Jordan* (initial printing 10,000, annual run 300-400); and in 1986 he authored *Advent* (initial printing 10,000).

By Adventist publishing standards Walton has done well. According to one source in the Seventh-day Adventist publishing industry, in 1986 the average run for a book in the Walton genre would be 5,000-6,000. To print 10,000 does not make Walton the Stephen King of the Adventist publishing industry, but it does place him significantly above the average. Add to this Walton's extensive speaking schedule, and we see a message that commands a hearing from a sizeable portion of the Seventh-day Adventist church.

The obvious and key question is why? Why is Walton so popular? What has enabled him to achieve the position he currently occupies within Adventism? The short answer: Lewis Walton's popularity results from his ability to calm many of his fellow Adventists by explaining the crises of the 1960s and 1970s in terms they can understand and believe—terms at the same time both Adventist and fundamentalist.

The longer answer is more complex. When

Lewis Walton published *Omega* in 1981, he benefited from the resurgence of conservatism as the prevailing national mood, including the rise of fundamentalism from a backwoods phenomenon to a potent national force, and the country's shift to the right with the election of Ronald Reagan. The downcast spirit of many Adventists, heightened by public disclosures of Adventism's theological and financial woes in national newspapers and newsweeklies, also gave Walton's message a more receptive audience than would have normally been the case. Furthermore, Walton's ability to interpret the events of the seventies within both categories of the Great Controversy and of fundamentalism, allowed him to establish connections with both the heritage of Adventism and the resurgent fundamentalism of the eighties. Walton asserted in *Omega* that the events of the seventies had long been prophesied by White herself as part of Satan's attempts to destroy God's church. He explained these same events through fundamentalist images of a battle between followers of the revelation of God as found in Scripture and humanists, following the dictates of human reason and understanding.

Adventism's relationship with fundamentalism extends back to the origins of the fundamentalist movement itself. Fundamentalism, an attitude more than a particular religious creed, commenced between 1910-1915 with the publication of *The Fundamentals*, 12 small volumes edited by Amzi C. Dixon and Reuben A. Torrey. These works, some six written by noted conservative theologians like Benjamin Warfield, sought to reduce the Christian message to its unalterable essentials and thus counteract the teachings of liberal Protestant theologians who accepted the scientific conclusions of the day as normative. Fundamentalists believed that liberals relegated Scripture to quaint and useful, but by no means authoritative, literature.

Integral to the fundamentalists was a belief in the Bible as the literal revelation of God. This included, among other things, belief in a six-day Creation, original sin, and the existence of miracles. Especially taboo were the modernist ideas of evolution and higher criticism.

During the 1920s Seventh-day Adventist lead-

ers welcomed fundamentalism and joined the movement with gusto, vigorously denouncing evolution, higher criticism, and alcohol. Adventists found in fundamentalism a support system that provided a bulwark against Adventism's own peculiar sensitive spots: attacks on the inspiration of Ellen White (where the historical-critical method could really hurt), and the pantheist heresies of the previous two decades. Land states that as early as 1905 Adventist writers correlated attacks on Ellen White and pantheism with the evils of higher criticism and evolution.

With such a tradition at his disposal, Walton was able to draw upon a rich heritage of fundamentalist thought. He expressed his views to Adventists in cadences woven from the cultural fabric of their past, calculated to offer the security they so desperately desired.

Unfortunately, what Walton also gave them was high-pitched rhetoric, crass emotionalism, inaccurate historical detail, and shoddy reasoning. In *Omega*, Walton wrote of the *alpha*, a term used by Ellen White and taken by many Adventists to refer to a period of hardship and crisis for the church. The *alpha* was understood by early Adventists as precipitated by the pantheism of John Harvey Kellogg, Albion Fox Ballenger's rival interpretation of Christ's sanctuary work, and the suspicions cast on the genuineness of Ellen White's prophetic gift by A.T. Jones, Kellogg, and others. Walton also appropriated the term *omega*, used by White to mean the final crisis to face the church from within before the Second Coming. Walton sought to establish parallels between White's *omega* and questionings of the sanctuary doctrine and Ellen White's inspiration by Desmond Ford and Walter Rea. Walton's supports for such parallels were contrived at best. It was almost a shame that there was no pantheist running around that he could have pointed to, so the entire equation could have balanced perfectly.

Walton ensconced the rest of his historical and theological rhetoric, which has already been critiqued in previous *Spectrum* articles (see Vol. 12, No. 2, December 1981), in a historical framework that suggests that the world was ready for the Second Coming if only Adventists had prepared themselves. Instead, they had fallen for the dev-

il's trap and allowed themselves to become embroiled in theological speculation and sophistry. Walton claimed, that "in a word it was astonishing. It was almost beyond explanation. People who enjoyed the greatest religious light in history were now imperiled by errors that could leave them trapped and they would not even know it." (*Omega*, p. 49).

Walton's more recent historical/theological books are no sounder and advocate the same themes. In *Decision at the Jordan* he paid more attention to perfectionism; one gets a healthy dose of this-is-definitely-the-end-so-repent-and-sin-no-more rhetoric. What is striking about *Decision*, *Advent*, and to a lesser degree, *Omega*, is Walton's use of the identical categories fundamentalists used in the 1920s to describe evil. For example, in *Decision* (p. 50) he did his readers the favor of pointing out the historical figures who were in the service of Satan. Yes, you're right—Darwin, Marx, and Mary Baker Eddy.

Like the fundamentalists of the past and present, Walton exhibited in his works an anti-intellectualism that is perhaps the litmus test for the true believer. Fundamentalists have always been, at heart, pietists; theirs is a religion of faith, almost to the extent of excluding reason. The key difference between Walton and a contemporary fundamentalist like Jerry Falwell, is that the intense energy Falwell expends in affirming the integrity of the Word of God, Walton exerts affirming the prophetic ministry of Ellen White. Still, anti-intellectualism makes them bedfellows.

In *The Roots of Anti-intellectualism in America* Richard Hofstadter links anti-intellectualism with a revolt against modernity that appealed mainly to those who were in America's heartland, "often fundamentalist in religion, nativist in prejudice, isolationist in foreign policy, and conservative in economics." The fundamentalists usually see the intellectual as the spokesperson and advocate for such evils as Darwinism, Freudianism, Marxism, and Keynesianism, and hold them largely responsible for the disintegration of the old and better America.

Walton elaborates this fundamental motif by

holding Adventist intellectuals responsible for the disintegration of the old and truer Adventism. Listen as he quotes Ellen White: "In the very midst of us will arise false teachers, giving heed to seducing spirits whose doctrines are of satanic origin" (*Omega*, p. 58). In speaking of Adam and Eve and the original sin Walton asks, "Would they subject God's revealed truth to their own analysis and judgment? Before believing, would they demand that God's word first be validated and reinterpreted by the human mind?" Walton's answer is yes (*Decision at the Jordan*, pp. 80-83).

Ironically, Walton, despite his valiant attempts to warn others of the evils of modern critical thinking, has failed to heed his own advice. Walton has allowed his name to be connected with a book that espouses Darwinistic ideas. In the book co-written with Herbert Douglass, *How to Survive the Eighties*, the authors begin by presupposing that if one is to survive the vicissitudes of modern life one must learn from nature. And what does nature have to teach us?

The answer came into focus one day as we read about a fortress someone had built in the American Northwest—a concrete bunker perched on the side of a rocky mountain, filled with weapons and food. Yet, within a few decades, it will begin to crumble, its foundation split by blades of grass. The concrete will fail; the grass will survive. That gave us the clue for which we were searching (p. 14).

The clue turns out to be in the word *survival*. As it happens, according to the authors, nature has a program for survival, but it is only for the strong. As they reiterate throughout the book, "Tomorrow is not for the weak!" In reading the book, one is flabbergasted to realize that the entire work is based on the Darwinian notion of survival of the fittest. Even the Bible becomes a sort of survival guide (p. 64).

This blunder illustrates a critical flaw of fundamentalism, whether it be of the Adventist variety or some other species. That is, it is impossible to escape the influences of modernity.

The Seventh-day Adventist church, a church born in the 19th century, will remain in the 19th century as long as men like Lewis Walton refuse to take the 20th century seriously and ignore the

unique problems faced by the modern person. One hopes that in time fundamentalists of all stripes will recognize the harmful effects of their trying to understand Adventism in fundamentalist categories.

## Adventism and 1844: Shut Door or Open Mind?

Ingemar Linden. *1844 and the Shut Door Problem*. Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Studia Historico-Ecclesiastica Upsaliensia 35 (Uppsala: by the author, 1982), 130 pp.

Reviewed by Rolf J. Poehler

The persistent questions regarding Ellen White's involvement with the so-called "shut-door doctrine" of Seventh-day Adventism's infancy years seemed to have been finally settled once and for all almost 40 years ago, in 1951. That was the year Francis D. Nichol devoted about one-fourth of his 700-page volume, *Ellen G. White and Her Critics*, to an uncompromising rebuttal of the charge "that Mrs. White taught that the door of mercy was closed on October 22, 1844." However, despite the case presented by this talented attorney for the defense of the arraigned prophetess, the newly developing critical approach to Adventist history sooner or later led Adventist scholars to appeal her acquittal on the grounds that the jurors had been prejudiced in Ellen White's favor.

The opportunity to arraign the prophetess anew for allegedly teaching heretical views was seized exactly 20 years later by the Swedish church

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historian Ingemar Linden in his doctoral dissertation, entitled “Biblicism, Apocalyptic, Utopi” (Uppsala, 1971). His investigation into the early history of Adventism in the United States (which makes up the first part of his thesis) led him to bolster the traditional charges (best known through D. M. Canright’s polemical writings) by means of a critical analysis of the original sources. Linden argued that Ellen White belonged to the radical, left-wing minority of post-Disappointment Adventism that gave strong visionary support to the abortive shut-door theory. That theory excluded all, except faithful Millerites, from access to divine mercy. Swiftly, the indicted prophet’s grandson, Arthur L. White, responded in a 62-page paper entitled “Ellen G. White and the Shut-Door Question” (1971). Arthur White reiterated the traditional Adventist position that was repeated in his six-volume biography of Ellen White.

Seven years later, Linden’s indictment was presented for English-speaking readers in *The Last Trump* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1978). The author claimed it was “the first serious scholarly presentation of Adventism,” but it apparently failed to get the attention Linden hoped it would receive. Finally, a third volume from the pen of the Swedish scholar focused exclusively on the troublesome issue of the shut-door. This last work—which is the first book-length monograph on the shut-door question in print—purports to be at last a factual, scholarly, comprehensive, and indeed definitive, study of a problem that has troubled the Adventist church since its very beginning.

*1844 and the Shut-Door Problem* begins with a discussion of the “shut-door ideology” that (after the “shipwreck” of Millerism and its “ultraistic” Midnight Cry Movement) developed in the “radical left wing” of this “most spectacular apocalyptic revival.” The Sabbatarian pioneers were among this “dangerous faction” that followed “fanatical aberrations” in both doctrine and practice (Chapter 1).

Following this, Linden takes up “the crux of the whole problem” (p. 11), namely, the involvement of Ellen White in this “heresy.” According to him, the young prophetess had a “radical sect-

arian mind” (p. 70, note 70) and taught this “very ultraistic and radical” view until 1851 (Chapter 2).

Then follows a very brief and thus necessarily superficial delineation of the “new theology,” viz., the doctrines of the sanctuary and of the investigative judgment which, in the author’s eyes, constituted “a major metamorphosis” (Chapter 3).

The two concluding chapters present a valuable survey of the controversial debates on the shut door that may have begun as early as 1853 and continued throughout denominational history until the present time. Emphasis is placed on the more recent Adventist writers on the subject of the shut door: F. D. Nichol, A. L. White, P. G. Damsteegt, and R. J. Poehler. The last two, Linden says, offer “some promising indications” for a new and more factual approach toward this old problem (p. 107).

Linden has obviously benefited from the studies of Damsteegt and Poehler who had strongly criticized his views on several counts. As a result, Linden has somewhat softened his rather harsh language, made certain minor but not unimportant admissions, and shows a more balanced interpretation of past writers on the issue. He also silently dropped certain interpretations that were ill-founded and untenable from the start.

At the same time, the book basically reiterates Linden’s previous positions on the shut-door question, which—in the eyes of his critics—are partly overdrawn. For example, Linden still treats the widening gap among shut-door believers after 1844 on doctrinal as well as practical issues as being of only little or no significance. Linden also fails to respond to the argument that the later explanatory statements made by Ellen White do not stand in “direct contradiction” and “glaring contrast” to her original views except in a purely formal, verbal sense. And as long as “any shut-door view” is regarded by historians *a priori* as “fanatical” on theological grounds alone (p. 115), there is little hope that historical research on the shut-door doctrine will bring about “a scholarly presentation, based on the naked facts” (p. 116,

emphasis supplied).

In addition to repeating his known views, Linden presents a series of new interpretations which unfortunately lack sufficient historical and textual support. In his most serious contention, Linden charges James White with manipulating his wife's visions almost beyond recognition (pp. 38-49). However, his evidence is badly put together, and the references given are either misleading or false. The question arises, "Is this the supposed 'definitive presentation' we are promised in the introduction?" It is an imposition to be confronted by what is at best a rough draft for a literary analysis of Ellen White's earliest visions.

As this reviewer's unpublished essay on the shut-door problem repeatedly comes up for discussion and also receives an extended review in the book, it may be of interest to note that, had it not been for its "middle-of-the-way-interpretation" (p. 116) of Ellen White's role in the shut-door years, Linden would have regarded it as "the definitive work on this topic" (p. 117). He finds my criticism of the apologetical approach to Ellen White so "gratifying" and "important that it deserves being written in golden letters" (pp. 112-113). But then he charges me with being a kind of sophisticated crypto-apologist who could not write impartially due to external pressure. Therefore, Linden says, I desperately tried to accomplish the impossible feat of trying to save the face of Ellen White, while facing the facts about her (pp. 115-119). As a rule, Linden gives enthusiastic support wherever I seem to agree with the

critics ("most significant study" and "a great eye-opener") but heavily scolds me whenever I sound like the apologists ("very unconvincing" and "biased and untenable reasoning"). In fact, *1844 and the Shut-Door Problem* appears to be intended as an involved rebuttal to what Linden amiably calls the "ecumenical solution" set forth in my . . . *And the Door Was Shut*.

In the past, apologists and critics bitterly fought over the question of whether or not the Adventist pioneers, particularly Ellen White, believed that the "door" had been "open" or "shut." Participants generally felt and consistently acted like the Roman gladiators fighting in the arena: only one would survive the battle, while the other one had to die (unless they both died because of their mutually inflicted wounds!). Then there was a third alternative: to combine the valuable insights of both positions while honestly recognizing their respective weaknesses. As a result, the door now appeared to have been left ajar—seemingly closed but ready to be opened wide by the gentle force of the Spirit who blows where he wills.

At last, a genuine solution seemed to have become available that offered the real prospect of bridging the gap between both perspectives, not by covering up some facts for the sake of "union" and "compromise," but rather by facing them squarely. Now, some who feel uncomfortable in the draft may try to close that door again. They might succeed—unless someone greater has put his foot in the door.