

PRESENT TRUTH IN THE REAL WORLD

by Jon Paulien

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INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of this book lies in its attempt to describe reality. Reality is not always pretty. Reality is not always what we want to hear or know about. But reality is where we all live and move and have our being. Many today have lost confidence in the Adventist Church and its people. But I have found that most Adventists are hungry for truth and hungry for reality. It is the Adventist people, including many God-fearing leaders of this Church, who have driven me to publish these things in a book. I do not claim to be the last word on the realities our Church faces. Many will wish to respond to one point or another. Much brainstorming and experimentation must follow from a reading of this book. I offer this book with the prayer that it will help precipitate a revival of faithfulness to God's purposes in a new and often bewildering time in earth's history.

It is not the purpose of this book to offer a "last word" on this subject from Scripture and the "Spirit of Prophecy". As a Biblical scholar who is also thoroughly immersed in the writings of Ellen White, I usually prefer to approach a subject from the evidence of inspiration. A thorough investigation of these sources, however, would have lengthened the

book beyond the endurance of most readers and would probably blunt the compelling force of its glimpse of reality. Guided by my lifelong research in inspiration but without constant reference to it, the content of this book arises out of my observations of the reality that Adventists find themselves in as they seek to live out their faith in a secular world. I am encouraged in this "dangerous" approach by the thousands of Adventists who have heard this material in spoken form and confirmed its observations. I invite readers to search inspired writings for themselves to see if these things are really so.

A major reality that Adventists face today is that while the church as a whole is growing by leaps and bounds in selected places, we aren't experiencing that kind of growth and excitement in most churches in North America. While pastors in New Guinea hardly have time for evangelism because they are so busy screening the thousands that think success in life is spelled "SDA," most pastors in North America, Europe, and Australia are delighted if a handful of people show up for a stop-smoking clinic, much less for spiritual meetings!

The hopelessness and malaise that I sense in so many Anglo churches in North America is to a large degree the result of a process that is called "secularization." Secularization means that a society is becoming more and more inclined to view life without

reference to God or religion. There is an gradual erosion of belief in the supernatural, whatever happens is limited to this world and to sense experience. Religious values and practices are increasingly discarded. And the church, as an institution, declines in its influence on the larger society. A secular person or society may not have consciously rejected religion or God, but God plays a diminishing role in people's day to day lives.

In a different category is the word "secularism." This refers to a consciously-adopted philosophy which rejects all forms of religious faith and worship. A secularist may be described as a "missionary" for secularism. He or she is in contrast, however, to the more-typical secular person who merely finds religion to be irrelevant to life, but is not hostile toward it.

Many Adventists shy away from outreach to the secular mindset because they do not believe that it is "do-able." If someone handed you a basketball for the first time and eight of your first ten shots went in, you would say to yourself, "This isn't difficult at all--I can do this!" But if every shot missed by a mile, you might never touch a ball again. So it is with witnessing, many Adventists have made ten attempts to reach secular people and missed by a mile every time. This lack of success makes people reluctant even to try.

Another barrier we face in reaching out to the secular mindset is that SDAs are really much more comfortable in their own cultural setting than they are out in world. When we are among ourselves we know how to talk and we know how to walk. For most Christians, reaching out to secular people is like entering a foreign land. We hear filthy language and dirty jokes. We smell tobacco smoke and alcohol. We are faced with uncomfortable challenges to our faith nearly every moment. Targeting secular people is not an easy choice to make. It isn't a substitute for the more difficult forms of evangelism--it is the most difficult form. If this book will encourage even one person to step out in faith and reach out to secular neighbors, friends, and family it will have been worth the effort.

Evangelistic success creates excitement and builds churches. What excites me about this topic is that, if taken seriously by a local church, it can put that church at the center of its community's life again. Whenever I share this subject in a church, inevitably there are half a dozen secular people there. They are usually the ones who are the most enthusiastic and say, "If this is the kind of religion you Adventists have, count us in." To succeed, however, we need to know that there are certain approaches that don't work with secular people. If you can come to understand some of the ways that do work, your "hits" will

increase and your "misses" will decrease. You probably won't begin with an eighty percent success ratio, but it is exciting to build your percentage with God's help.

A number of areas which could profitably have been dealt with in this book are intentionally left out so that the primary focus is not lost on the reader. One major omission is in the area of "apologetics," the task of finding answers to the many objections that secular people have regarding the existence of God, the reliability of the Bible, the problem of evil, and other issues often used to excuse a disinterest in Christian faith. Such issues deserve considerable treatment in their own right. Apologetics may not be as crucial to the process as one might expect, however. In my experience secular people don't normally come to faith as a result of intellectual argument, but because of an encounter with the living God. And when God has become real to them, their objections usually fall away in light of their new perspective on life.

Another omission is the whole area of ministry to our own Adventist youth. Many of the problems we face in relation to secular outsiders we face also in relation to the youth that live in our own homes and attend our own churches. Readers attempting to reach youth will

find much in this book that will be of use, but little attempt has been made to spell out the relevance of this material to youth ministry.

No attempt has been made to relate directly to issues of peace, justice, and societal advancement. Those interested in such issues, however, will note that Part Two does set out a biblical and spiritual rationale for involvement in significant social issues, although the connection is not explicitly made there.

Finally, although this book is very practical in orientation, it aims to set out the big picture rather than a detailed "how-to" approach. The general principles concerning how Adventist faith can meet the challenge of a secular world will suggest a variety of creative applications to the reader, however. Those seeking to develop their understanding further are directed to the annotated bibliography at the close.

Some may question whether the age of secularism has not already come to an end with the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, the onset of the New Age movement and the increasing strength of evangelicals in North American politics. These movements certainly bear watching, but secularism remains the dominant intellectual force in the so-called "First World" and is an increasing influence in the so-called "Third World." Time will tell if the recent resurgence of religious interest in many parts of the world is a harbinger of both end-time revival and end-time apostasy. But for now the secular mindset remains one of the major obstacles to evangelistic outreach.